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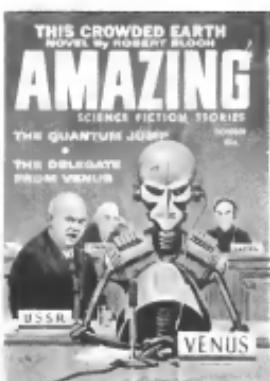
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VOL. 7 NO. 12



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fantastic

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DECEMBER 1958

Volume 7 Number 12

NOVELETS

JUNGLE IN MANHATTAN

By G. L. Vandenbush 0

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THE TROONS OF SPACE

The Moon A. D. 2044

By John Wyndham 80

SHORT STORIES

THE ELEVENTH PLAGUE

By Henry Slesar 53

ENOUGH ROPE

By Louis Fisher 122

FEATURES

EDITORIAL 5

ACCORDING TO YOU 7

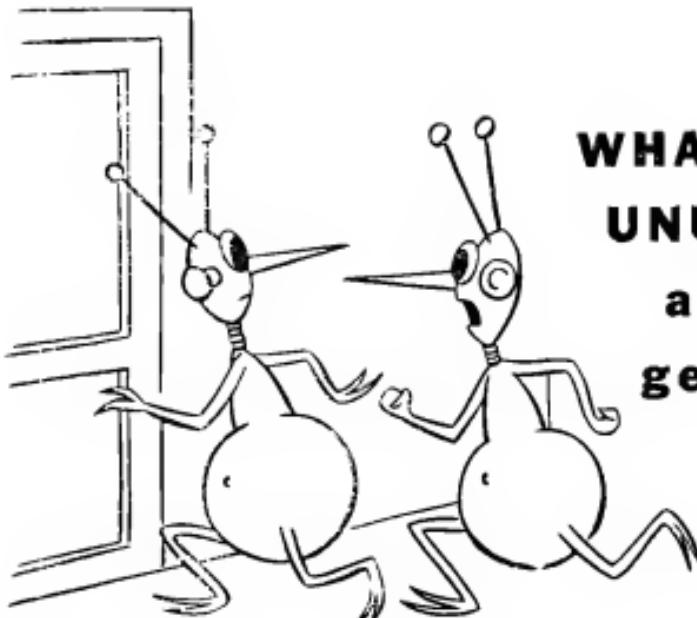


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A SENSE OF WONDER

Recently a cartoon appeared in *The New Yorker* depicting a spaceship filled with passengers hurtling through the cosmos to its destination on some faraway planet. The caption read: "I'll have the orange juice, scrambled eggs and bacon, toast, marmalade, and coffee, please." Your first reaction to such a cartoon would, I hope, be a chuckle. Editors are noted for their allegedly perverted sense of humor, so I feel no fear in saying I thought it one of the most hilarious comments on space travel I've encountered in some time.

But if you stop to think about it for a moment, there is more than humor in the concept; there is a kind savage commentary on our times. For the real fantasy today is the almost-bored, certainly unimaginative reaction most people have toward what are miracles of science and nature.

At first glance, this cartoon is funny. But I am convinced that soon after the first spaceships set up their interplanetary routes, the tourist taking his two-week trip to Mars will spend more time complaining about the food and the acceleration than he will in contemplating the ultimate glories of the universe. I will give two-to-one right now that at least half the travelers will take one perfunctory look through the observation ports, and then spend the rest of the trip in the lounge, playing canasta.

I don't think I'm being overly cynical. It is fantastic, if you stop to think about it, that the new commercial jets fly from New York to Europe in six hours. But how many of the passengers give that aspect of the flight more than a fleeting thought? No, most of them take it for granted.

The stupendous pace of our scientific advancement has perhaps conditioned us to take the fantastic for granted, to order Breakfast Special #4 while our spaceship hurtles through the cosmos. But it is sad to think that the sense of wonder is dying.

If things keep up, the sense of wonder will be something exclusively reserved for you and me—which wouldn't be a bad idea. At any rate, we'll do our best to keep *Fantastic* a magazine that will give your sense of wonder a monthly workout.

Down with reality!—N.L.

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ACCORDING TO YOU...

Dear Editor:

I was very surprised to find that I am a major opponent of your new policy via Alice Dooley's letter in the October *Fantastic*. I must admit that I have complained a bit about the fact articles as I buy *Fantastic* for entertainment. When I want to be educated I read *Scientific American*.

As far as I'm concerned about your new policy on types of fiction stories, it's tops. I've always enjoyed reading good fantasy and I intend to continue doing so. But, if a story is poor, I'll say so. Even then, it should not be taken as an attack on your overall policy. After all, editors are human regardless of what some people say.

P. F. Skeberdis
401 Hallisy, Ferris Institute
Big Rapids, Michigan

• *Thank you for that last kind sentence. Sometimes we even wonder ourselves.*

Dear Editor:

Science fiction controversies seem to go in cycles, but I had hoped that the old, worn-out controversy regarding alleged religious elements in science fiction as a whole had been given fitting burial and forgotten. But, like the Shaver Mystery, this old war-horse has been trotted out of pasture for another tilt at the ivory towered windmills of our favorite literature. In a more enlightened era Edd Doerr of Bogota, Colombia (October issue) would get bladed good and proper across his gluteus area for waving the bloody shirt.

So Blish's "A Case of Conscience" is anti-scientific? You'd have a hard time convincing a great many of us.

I doubt if you could find a group more liberal and more varied in religious belief than in the field of science fiction enthusiasts. You would find every shade of belief and non-belief from active members of the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism to nuns of various Roman Catholic

(Continued on page 128)



In less than a second the serene concert had turned into a



hideous nightmare.

JUNGLE IN MANHATTAN

By G. L. VANDENBURG

ILLUSTRATOR SCHROEDER

Slimy, slithering, seaborous savage—they were all of these, but the strange young man loved them. He hated only one thing: People.

THE envelope contained a wrinkled piece of brown wrapping paper. There was no greeting, no signature. Only six lines of verse written in a crude hand.

*conical bone and greenish hue
repayment for debts long overdue
shingles, rattles (not for playing)
a date with death, a time for slaying
slippery slippers for my detractors
adders function as subtractors*

It was close to six-thirty

and I was stalling in the city room, feeling sorry for the poor souls working the presses down below. I had a date with Corrine at seven but, being in no hurry to expose myself to the equatorial weather that was smothering Manhattan, I'd checked the mailbox. There had been three inconsequentials and the envelope containing the verse was the fourth in the box.

My first thought was that some obscure Bohemian had intended his deathless jingle to reach the poetry editor. I checked the envelope again to make sure.

Mr. Kenneth Summers
c/o *The Daily Messenger*
New York City, New York

No question about it. It was for me all right. But why? Again I looked at the envelope. No return address. I read the verse again. I might as well have tried translating the Dead Sea Scrolls.

I wasn't about to enroll in a cryptography course just to be able to decipher six lines of verse so I showed the note to Harry Soames, night editor and man of a thousand talents.

Harry sucked on his favorite pipe, reading the verse over and over in silence. He

handed it back without looking at me.

"It stinks, Ken. You'd better stick to feature stuff. You'll never be another Kipling."

"Harry, I didn't write it! I got it in the mail."

A grin crept over his owlish face. He knew damn well I hadn't written it. He looked at it again, briefly.

"A crank," he said.

The clock above the water cooler told me I had five minutes to meet Corrine. That made it convenient to agree with Harry. "A crank," I repeated, stuffed the note in my pocket and headed for the nearest elevator.

Leaving the revolving door that led to 40th Street was like stepping in front of a blast furnace. The evening sun hung in sultry silence over the Palisades, cloaking Manhattan's skyscrapers in fiery orange. Gaseous heat danced up from the feverish, sticky asphalt of the street.

I walked toward the Show Spot, wondering why legislation couldn't be passed giving the month of July back to either the weather bureau or the Indians.

The Show Spot was close to Broadway on 40th. You'd never know it from the name

but the joint was strictly a newspaperman's hangout. Descending the short ramp that led in from the street, I checked the time. Seven o'clock on the nose. When it was mobbed, which it was at the moment, the place looked and sounded like a political convention. The far end of the bar was camouflaged by a heavy smoke screen. The clatter of voices sounded like a thousand hung juries all gathered in one room. Profanity was exploding in every direction, like flak in an air raid.

I shouted hellos at nine or ten familiar faces as I blazed a trail to the end of the bar. Corrine was nowhere in sight.

Danny, the night bartender, slapped a bottle of beer on a coaster and shoved it in front of me."

"How are you, Mr. Summers?"

The air conditioning was off and half the guys in the place were puffing on dime cigars.

"Freezing," I said.

Danny laughed. He laughed at everything. He was a sweet guy who believed that newspapermen were the funniest characters on earth; also to laugh at their wit was good for business.

"Has Corrine been in?"

"Not yet."

It was seven-ten. She'd

never been more than five minutes late since I'd known her. But Corrine also happens to be a reporter, so I figured anything could have come up to delay her.

I studied whiskey labels for a minute before I remembered the note written by my anonymous poet friend. I took it out and read it again. For some reason it was hard to dismiss as pure gibberish.

When Danny passed my way again I flagged him down and showed him the note. "What do you make of this?"

He read it aloud, frowned and went over it again. Then he looked up at me as though I had asked him to explain the Quantum Theory. I shrugged and closed my eyes, assuring him that I too was baffled. He felt better. After reading it again a broad grin blossomed on his face.

"I got it!" he shouted. "It's one of them riddles! You know, like they give on television quiz programs? Figure it out and they give you—"

"A free oasis in the Gobi desert and a lifetime supply of soft boiled eggs."

Danny roared and called me a card.

Corrine showed up at seven-forty. I didn't see her come in but I knew she was there

because the swearing suddenly stopped.

In a moment, velvet hands slipped around my chest. From behind me she whispered a soft kiss into my ear. "Hi."

I looked into the mirror. She was wearing a pale green shantung dress. "You're late."

"How'd you guess?" Her voice had a husky, seductive quality. She looked at me with eyes I couldn't get angry at.

I ordered her a martini. "What happened?"

"I ran smack into a crowd the size of a regiment in Bryant Park behind the library."

"What was wrong?"

"Bunch of sightseers panicked when a two-foot snake came out of the bushes—"

I raised an eyebrow. "A snake in Bryant Park?"

"Right, darling. The police had killed it just before I got there. They were beating the bushes to make sure the pretty little thing didn't have any relatives handy."

"What kind of a snake?"

"Nobody got close enough to ask questions about ancestry. I got a quick look after they'd killed it. Never saw one like it before. I called in to the night desk and then scooted over here as fast as I could."

"Didn't you wait to find

out where the thing came from?"

"I was going to do that but then I remembered I had a date with a prize-winning reporter from the *Daily Messenger*. I just had to tear myself away."

I put my arm around her. "You know, I used to go with a girl who was never on time. And it was all the fault of a great ferocious lion she met in the subway. Don't you think that's more imaginative than snakes in Bryant Park?"

"Ken!"

I kissed her before she got another word out. The taste of martini was on her warm lips. Suddenly neither one of us wanted to spend any more time in the Show Spot.

We had dinner at Le Gourmet, Corrine's favorite French restaurant. After dinner we caught the last performance of a musical which had opened earlier in the week. A nightcap at Pen and Pencil completed the evening.

I had two good reasons for not telling Corrine about the note. Being a woman her curiosity would have made life miserable until we had figured out the damn verse. Result: lousy date. The second reason was more practical. Corrine was a reporter

first and a fiancée second. Aside from that she worked for the opposition *Morning Telegraph*. Love her as I did, if the note had any potential as a story, I didn't want her to get within writing distance of it.

I took her home at midnight. She was leaving for a week end with relatives in Connecticut the next morning and had to be up early. On the way to my own apartment I picked up copies of the *Messenger* and the *Telegraph*.

Both papers carried lower front page accounts of the snake incident in Bryant Park. The snake was a horned viper. Both accounts revealed that the natural habitat of the horned viper is Egypt.

Monday morning I dashed off the final article of a six part series on the crime syndicate. On my way out to lunch I stopped by the mailbox. There was another envelope, identical to the one I'd received on Friday. I opened it. Another piece of brown wrapping paper. This time there were only two lines of verse.

*Direct current, hirsute limbs.
Reckoning day for official
whims.*

After that second note

events happened at a crackling pace. All of Tuesday's papers carried feature stories of a weird incident at the Criminal Courts Building. A washroom on the main floor had become flooded. While workmen were trying to locate the source of the flood they came face to face with a five-foot water viper. The workmen scattered and all escaped injury. The snake found its way into the lobby of the building and slithered around scaring everyone in sight. The police finally trapped and killed it.

Wednesday the mailbox contained a third note.

*Mississippiensis completes
the chore.*

Pity the useless Dinosaur.

It was then that I first linked the notes with the two snake incidents. Call it reporter's intuition . . . or, to be more honest, reporter's wishful thinking. If the notes did have anything to do with the two weird happenings it would make a whopper of a story.

I placed all three notes together to see if they made any more sense that way. I laid them out one under the other on my desk.

*Conical bone and greenish hue,
Repayment for debts long overdue.
Shingles, rattles (not for playing),
A date with death, a time for slaying
Slippery slippers for my detractors,
Adders function as subtractors.
Direct current, hirsute limbs.
Reckoning Day for official whims.
Mississippiensis completes the chore.
Pity the useless Dinosaur.*

If—and it was a mighty big if—the notes had any bearing on the two incidents, then one part of the verse was beginning to add up. The part about “rattles” that were “not for playing” could only mean one thing. Both the snake in Bryant Park and the one in the Criminal Courts Building were different forms of vipers. So, by a happy coincidence, was the American rattlesnake.

The meaning of one word in the verses eluded me. The word was Mississippiensis. A quick check through a zoological reference book however, told me that it was a

delta alligator, and not a very friendly one. I dug up the Friday and Tuesday papers again to see whether either of the two snakes had been missing or stolen from a zoo. The papers mentioned nothing about zoos.

I was proceeding strictly on hunches rather than facts. Certain now that the verses contained references to 1.) a rattlesnake, 2.) an alligator and 3.) some kind of an adder, probably poisonous (“adders function as subtractors”), I knew there was at least a coincidental tie-in between the notes and the incidents. Both had something to do with a wide variety of reptiles.

There were still parts of the verse that did not seem to apply to any member of the reptilian group that I was familiar with. “Hirsute limbs,” for instance, and “conical bone,” “direct current,” “slippery slippers”: these were all as cryptic as ever. And there was still one important question that I didn’t have the answer to. Why were the notes being sent to me?

I thought of going to the police. But what, I asked myself, would I tell them? That the freak appearances of snakes over the past week

were being perpetrated by someone who had been sending me hints in the form of poetry? Someone whose identity I could not reveal because I didn't know it myself? If I did that I'd wind up in a padded cell surrounded by three city psychiatrists. There was nothing to do but await further developments.

Three mail deliveries on Thursday produced nothing new in the way of cryptic poetry. I scoured every edition of every paper for another snake scare. I found nothing. Thursday was as uneventful as a monastery picnic.

Friday was a red letter day!

At 9:00 P.M. Corrine and I met for a drink at the Show Spot. Except for a stranger at the far end of the bar and Danny, the nightman, the place was deserted. Having received no new mystery correspondence in two days I was beginning to believe I had been off base in my amateur detective work. I intended to put reptiles out of my thoughts and spend a quiet week end with Corrine.

By the time Danny brought us a third drink we were wrapped up in our favorite argument; whether or not

Corrine would stop working when we were married. I said yes and she said no. After a two-year engagement that's as close as it ever came to being settled.

I was about to launch into a short dissertation on how she, a wife and mother, would look following up a story with a baby under her arm. But I noticed she was staring toward the door as though Conan Doyle had just walked in.

"What are you looking at?" I asked her.

"You'd never believe me," she said.

My back was to the door. I had to lean out of the booth and crane my neck to see what was going on.

The man standing at the head of the ramp was as drunk as a fiddler at an Irish wedding. He shuffled down the ramp and weaved his way toward the bar. A party hat made of fuchsia crepe paper sat at a rakish angle on his head. An insipid smile reached as far as both his ears. At any moment it seemed he might gurgle like a baby. Then I saw what Corrine was staring at.

The drunk was carrying a fish, at least a two-pounder, under his arm.

I moved to the other side of the booth next to Corrine to

get a better look. I was anxious to see how the bartender was going to handle the petrified comedian.

The drunk made it to the bar and leaned against it for support, his smile still in place. Danny looked up and started to ask him what he would have. It is to his eternal credit that, when he saw the fish, he didn't bat an eye. He just rested his elbows on the bar and peered at the weird looking creature. The fish, not long out of water, had a deadpan expression in its dreamy pink eyes. Its mouth kept puckering and making that psshhh sound that fishes make.

Danny's eyes became like saucers. He worked his mouth back and forth, mocking the fish.

Psshhh! The fish came right back at him.

Danny roared with laughter.

"Hey, Ken," he yelled at me, "have you met my friend here?"

"The stew or the fish?" I shot back.

"The fish, of course. You know I don't associate with drunks."

"Service! Let's have a li'l service!" The man was suffering from the oldest of al-

coholic maladies; hiccuping in the middle of two syllable words. He pounded on the bar with his free hand.

"What'll it be?" asked Danny.

The drunk pointed his free hand at the helpless fish.

"Fry him for me and I'll eat him here!"

The bartender's forbearance was admirable.

"And what would you like for an appetizer? Some fried bumble bees dipped in honey, maybe?"

A quizzical frown warped the man's features. "Wassa matter with you, buddy? I said to fry him and I'll . . ."

"Eat him here!" said Danny acidly. He was a patient man with self-styled comedians until they reached a punch line and the drunk had reached his. "Out, mister, out!" Danny ordered.

The drunk became belligerent. "You gonna fry my friend for me or do I hafta go out to the kit-chen and fry him myself?"

Danny glanced toward our booth. "Here's my chance to get my name in the papers."

My answer was drowned out by the sound of glass shattering. It was all over the bar. The drunk had smashed a beer mug. His free index finger dripped blood.

For a split second Danny was too stunned to move. I eased myself out of the booth to be ready if he needed me. Again the drunk pointed the blood-soaked finger at the helpless fish.

"Lissen, I want this l'il fella fried—"

A sudden frantic twist by the fish caused the drunk to lose his balance. He clutched at the bar in a desperate attempt to stay on his feet. The fish wriggled and throbbed and puffed viciously. Its pale pink hue turned a bright red. It seemed to sense the man's precarious position and it thrashed and wriggled with even greater intensity. It had almost freed itself. The man knew he was losing his grip. He used his free hand to shove his weird captive back under his arm. The bleeding index finger sent the fish into a paroxysm of madness. Its mouth opened. Small scalpel-sharp teeth reflected the neon light of the bar.

"Look out!!" I knew when I said it that I was too late. But before then I had not realized what kind of a fish it was, not until I saw those teeth.

The man's scream was shrill, sickening. He was on the floor now. The index finger was gone. The fish lay

beside him, pulsating frenziedly, trying to get at more of the bleeding hand.

Danny climbed over the bar. We dragged the injured man to a booth. I whipped out a handkerchief and secured it around his elbow. The bleeding subsided. I examined the wound. It was bad enough for me *not* to fool with. I told Corrine to get a doctor.

"What happened?" The man spoke in a dazed half-whisper.

I didn't quite know how to tell him that his friend had just made a meal of his index finger, right down to the third joint.

He looked down at the torn crimson flesh. Another terrible scream filled the room.

"My finger! Get a doctor!! Someone get a doctor! My finger is gone—"

He bolted out of the booth and ran for the door. I grabbed him, slapped him in the face and shoved him back in the booth. His eyes were glazed as though he'd been mesmerized. He could not avoid staring at the damaged hand, and whimpering like a scared kid.

"Hey, Ken, what the hell should I do with this thing?"

Danny stood over the fish which was still thrashing

around on the floor. I yelled to him to put the thing out of circulation and turned back to the man.

"You'll be all right. I have a tourniquet on your elbow. If there's any poison there's no danger of it spreading. But the next time you decide to play with one of your pet fishes you'd better be sure of the one you pull out of the tank, mister."

He looked at me, uncomprehending.

"What — what do you mean?"

"You should know something about piranha fish before you get playful with them."

"What kind of fish?"

"Piranha. The bloodthirstiest little creatures that swim in water. A school of them can devour a human being in ten sec—" I stared back at the man. "Wait a minute! You mean you didn't know what kind of a fish that was?"

He hesitated, embarrassed. "No, I didn't."

"Wasn't the damn thing yours?"

He looked the other way and winced. "Where's the doctor? What's keeping him!"

"Never mind the doctor. I told you you're going to be all

right. What about the fish? Where did you get it?"

He didn't answer.

"What the hell did you do, rob a pet store? What's the big secret?"

"I found him at the corner of 9th and 40th."

"You're still drunk."

"No, honest, mister. That's the truth. Practically the whole block down there is flooded. I guess a water main broke. I was just coming from a party and I saw the fish floating along in the gutter. I figured I must have been seeing things but when I reached over to pick him up I found he was real. I thought it was pretty funny to find a fish that way so I stuck him under my arm and —" his voice trailed off as he looked back at his finger.

I didn't know whether to believe the story. The man had been raging drunk. There was no reason why he couldn't have concocted the story to cover up the embarrassment of having lifted a ferocious piranha fish out of his own tank or the tank of some pet store. I was still turning the story over in my mind when Corrine came out of the telephone booth.

"Doctor's on his way."

"What took you so long?"

"I put a call in to the paper

after I talked with a doctor. I guess this is believe-it-or-not night."

"Why, what's up?"

"Rewrite man told me a man was bitten by a water moccasin a half hour ago on 9th Avenue near 40th Street."

"A water moccasin!"

"That's what I said. The man died ten minutes later. Can you imagine that? A damn water moccasin!"

The injured man leaned forward. "You see, I was telling you—"

"I know, I know," I cut in quickly and eased him back in the booth. "Now you just relax and wait for the doctor."

He had been telling the truth and I knew it. But Corrine did not know what he had said and, if I had my way, she wasn't going to hear it.

Several big chunks of the mystery verse had just fallen into place. I had no doubt now that the notes and the freak incidents were part and parcel of a nightmarish criminal plot.

As a newspaperman I owed the story to my paper and the public. But it was too big to be handled by one person. I could have kicked myself for being engaged to a dame who worked on another paper. We'd have made quite

a team on this story but for that one major drawback. Much as I hated to do it I had to find a way to give her the slip.

There was someone else who could give me the help I needed; Captain Murphy at the 42nd Street Precinct. As long as the police had to be informed anyway I figured it'd be best to inform one who was an old friend.

"Keep an eye on things," I told Corrine. "I want to call *The Messenger*."

The phone booth was near the entrance to the bar. I stepped inside and dialed. I waited for someone at the 42nd Street Precinct to answer. The notes were still at my office. I could pick them up as soon as I shook my fiancée.

The voice belonged to someone who sounded like he was talking through a mouthful of mashed potatoes. "Fort-second-street-precinct!"

Reasonably sure I had made the right connection I asked for Captain Murphy.

"Busy, can't be disturbed," came the voice, slowing down a bit.

"This is Ken Summers, *Daily Messenger*. Tell him it's urgent."

Soon the voice answered,

"Okay," and I thought it would add *it's your funeral* but I was mistaken. I waited. In a moment a soft, familiar brogue came through.

"Hello, Ken. What's the emergency?"

"Can I come to your office?"

"Sorry, m'boy, but I'm busy with the commissioner right now."

"I'd like to talk to you about the water main break at 40th and 9th."

There was a split second of silence. "What about it?"

"I have the answer, Murphy."

Murphy put his hand over the mouthpiece. I could hear muffled voices. I wondered what the Police Commissioner was doing at Murphy's office.

"Ken," Murphy came back, "get over here as fast as you can."

"Murphy?"

"Yes?"

"This is a big story. I don't want my end of it loused up by a lot of big brass. You'll see that the Commissioner understands, won't you?"

"I'll see to it, Ken. Just get on over here."

I hung up and left the phone booth. The next step was to give Corrine some kind of a song and dance.

She saved me the trouble. When I got back to the injured man I noticed she wasn't even watching him. She was staring off to one side, a far away look in her gorgeous brown eyes. It appeared that she might be putting pieces of a story together herself.

When she saw me she quickly snapped out of her self-induced trance. "Ken, darling, I'm going to dash over to 9th and 40th. You never know, there might be an odd angle worth checking. Suppose I meet you back here in an hour?"

Just to be on the safe side I protested vigorously. I told her she was taking advantage of me, leaving me with the injured man.

"Don't worry, darling, the doctor'll be here any minute. See you in an hour." She blew a kiss at me and ran out the door.

Smart girl, I thought. She didn't want to share a good story any more than I did. I headed for the door.

"Hey, where you going?" yelled Danny.

"I have to find out who was the **last** owner of that fish."

"The last—what're you talking about?"

"You'll be reading about it

in the *Daily Messenger*, Danny."

Danny followed me to the door. "What about the guy? What the hell am I supposed to do?"

"He'll be all right." I reached the door. "The only part of his life that'll change is his handwriting."

I left the Show Spot and walked west on 46th Street toward the *Daily Messenger*.

The office consisted of a chair, a desk and a filing cabinet crowded into a corner. The room was small and square. The man whose name graced the door was not small and he was anything but square.

Murphy greeted me like a conquering hero. His handshake was an unforgettable experience. On the police beat there was a running gag that Murphy himself weighed only eighty pounds but his arms tipped the scales at a hundred and fifty. He was close to sixty and looked like he could still go eight or nine rounds before he'd lose his breath.

"Keuny, m'boy, how are you. What've you got? Let's have it, boy, let's have it." He wasn't one to waste anybody's time.

"Hold on, Murphy. I saw the Commissioner when I

came in. As of the moment I have this story exclusive. I want to keep it that way."

"The first question from another paper will get a 'no comment' from the Commissioner. I have his word on that."

No police force ever had a tougher or fairer-minded cop than Murphy. His word was like a government check.

"Okay," I said. "First of all it is no accident that these strange reptiles have been roaming around the city."

"What do you mean?"

"These incidents were planned, Murphy." I took the verses from my pocket and placed them on his desk. "Somewhere in this city a maniac is loose and for some crazy reason he's set about to kill indiscriminately. Look at these and you'll see what I mean."

Murphy read the verses. He turned in his swivel chair and peered out the window, scratching the red stubble on his face with the back of his hand. He read the verses again.

"I don't understand where you see the connection, Ken."

"The first note came in my mail last Friday, the day of the Bryant Park episode. Monday the second one arrived, a day before the wash-

room flood at Criminal Courts building. The third one came day before yesterday. Tonight we had the water main incident. One man is dead from the bite of a water moccasin and another man had his finger chewed away by a piranha fish."

He came around the desk and placed a lead-weight arm around my shoulder. "Don't you think it's just a coincidence, Ken? An interesting one, to be sure," he added hastily, "but a coincidence nonetheless."

"Murphy, don't give me the paternal treatment. It is *not* a coincidence. Look at those verses again. There are at least five references to different types of poisonous reptiles and fish—"

The old boy grinned. "The piranha isn't poisonous."

"It's carnivorous! That's worse."

"All right, suppose there does happen to be a maniac on the loose. And you've been smart enough to decode his mixed-up riddles. Tell me who he is. Or, better still, where I can find him."

"I'm not a professional detective. I don't have a ghost of an idea who he is."

"Well, he shouldn't be hard to find in a city of eight million, now, should he?" A glint

came to his eye and his brogue thickened. "Sorry, Ken, I thought you had something when you called me."

His Irish stubbornness annoyed me. "You mean you don't think there's a connection—"

"Yes, I do," he cut in. He jerked open a file drawer. His hand slipped into the drawer and produced three small pieces of brown wrapping paper. He placed them side by side under the ones I had brought. "I'm afraid I knew about the connection long before you did." He motioned me to come behind the desk and have a look.

I gulped at the sight of three verses identical to mine. "For crying out loud, Murphy, why did you let me go on frothing at the mouth? Why didn't you tell me?"

"You're the only newspaper person who knows. I had to find out how *much* you knew."

"I guess I have enough to start a pretty sensational story," I said, baiting him to find out how much *he* knew.

His eyes narrowed and withdrew under protruding red eyebrows. For a split second his guard was down and he looked haggard and angry. He'd obviously been up

day and night with the case. He turned on the cheerful side again and gave me a playful whack on the shoulder that almost sent me out the window.

"But you're not going to print a sensational story now, are you, Ken?"

"What's to stop me?"

"Your old friend Murphy."

"My old friend Murphy promised no interference."

A serious frown marred his even features. "Ken, I'm going to level with you. Aside from those damn verses we haven't gotten the first break in this case. It's a major miracle that only one person has been killed. We've got half the force conducting a search morning, noon and night. But who are they looking for? Where is he? Where will his pets strike next? What does he look like? What are his habits? Mother of God, man, you print a story like this now and tell the public we're limping along on guesswork and what kind of a panic do you think you'll start?"

"Murphy, are you asking me to keep the lid on this thing?"

"Only until something breaks for us, Ken."

"I can't do it. The public has a right to know—"

"Listen, you're a damn fool if you print it now!" It didn't take Murphy long to become impatient and that's what I wanted him to do.

"Why?"

"Because we both have everything to gain by cooperating with each other!"

"I'll bet that was the Commissioner's idea." I hated to infuriate him but this wasn't a time for mental chess. I wanted a good deal in exchange for cooperation.

"It's *my* idea! But, since you're behaving like a typical hard-headed reporter, suppose I tell you what *you* have to lose if you go off half cocked on this thing!!" I folded my arms and waited. "You say you figured out certain phrases in the verse and that's how you tied in the incidents, is that right, Mr. Hawkshaw?"

"That's right."

"And what do you suppose the entire New York police force has been doing," his chin jutted forward cockily, "sitting on their rumps waiting for you to let us in on your junior detective work?"

I shot my own chin out in defiance of his. "Maybe!"

"Well, we haven't!!" he exploded. Then came the barrage I'd hoped for. "We've had those ten lines of verse

analyzed by every kind of expert in captivity! We know what every cockeyed word is intended to mean and does mean! We know precisely what *kind* of a man we're looking for! All right, his face and his name are still a mystery! But we have enough information to know that the first big break to come our way will bust this case wide open!! If you print a story now," he took a deep breath before lowering the boom, "you won't get within ten blocks of my files. You can limp along like we had to and scrape the information together yourself!"

I didn't have to hear the other alternative. "Okay, Murphy, it's a deal."

He blinked in astonishment. "What's that?"

"The lid is on. It'll be a pleasure working side by side with you on this case."

One eyebrow leapt all the way up to his hairline. "What do you mean, side by side?"

"We're going to cooperate with each other, Murphy. I keep the story quiet and you give me access to your files, isn't that what you meant?"

He doubled his fists and crammed them into pockets that were too small to accommodate them. "You got me so mad I'm not sure what the

hell I *did* mean! But I guess that sounds fair enough. Come on," he said, beaming again, "I'd better let you talk with the Commissioner."

We headed for the outer office.

Commissioner Davidson was a heavy-set man with rimless glasses and chins that cascaded over his bowtie. There was a depressing cheerlessness about him and he kept his Homburg on indoors, probably so he could remove it in case the Mayor walked in.

We got the small talk out of the way in the outer office and returned to Murphy's cubicle for the important stuff.

"Mr. Summers has agreed that it's best to keep the story under wraps, Commissioner," Murphy was extra polite to his superior. Considering Davidson's personality it was understandable.

"For the time being," I added.

The Commissioner looked at me as David must have looked at Jonathan. "You're performing a great public service, Mr. Summers."

And I'm not hurting your job a damn bit. I resisted the temptation to say it. "Thanks, Commissioner. It'll be a pleas-

ure working with a man like Captain Murphy."

The Irishman went to the filing cabinet and pulled out a sheaf of official-looking papers.

Davidson turned a little pale. "Are those the reports?" He looked from Murphy to me and back to Murphy again.

"It's all right," Murphy assured him, "aside from being an excellent reporter, Mr. Summers is an old friend. I have his word that he won't exercise his function as a reporter. He'll keep the contents of the folder top secret until we're ready to release it."

The Commissioner was so relieved I thought for a moment he might remove the Homburg and wipe his brow. He went one better. He wished Murphy good hunting, thanked me again and said good night.

My friend removed his jacket and unbuttoned his shirt collar. We were in for a long session.

"Have a seat," he said, pointing to his swivel chair, "and relax while I bring you up to date."

I sat in his chair, propping my feet up on the desk. He sat on the desk itself. I leaned back and listened.

"You were right about one

thing, Ken. We certainly are dealing with a maniac. And that's bad enough, to be sure! What's worse is that he's also a devilishly clever fellow. Take a look at what I mean." He handed me the first of about twenty-five reports from the folder. "This is a headquarters report signed by Jonathan Stratton, one of the top psychiatrists in the city."

The first two paragraphs of the report told me the mystery man was intelligent, well read, the owner of a whopping inferiority complex and not a criminal, just a hell of a dangerous mental case.

The third and last paragraph said:

"It is quite likely that, many years ago, the subject was in some manner rebuffed by society (or by some individual who, in the subject's mind, represented society). The injury, no matter how remote today, has continued to operate with great intensity because the subject, smothered in his own inner world, was unable to react to it at the time it occurred. Mere words might have been sufficient at the time, in which case the injury would have been compensated for and would have faded from the memory. Now, however, a

part of the conscious memory clings to that day of extreme mortification. (Repayment for debts long overdue; Reckoning day for official whims). To speak of revenge as the motive here would be understating the case. This is clearly a case of revenge constituting the whole life-force of the individual, the one reason for living."

I placed the report on the desk. "Revenge." I pondered the word for a moment, then looked at Murphy. "Against everyone?"

"Well, I wouldn't say he's been the soul of discrimination up to now," Murphy replied.

"You have any idea why?"

He dug through more papers until he found the departmental expert's breakdown of the cryptic verse. "You might as well know what every phrase in the verse means. Then I'll be able to tell you how much they've helped us." He came around the desk and placed the report where we could both see it. "There are nine different living creatures disguised here. I'll start with the ones we've already had to deal with, "conical bone," meaning cone-shaped bone, meaning a horn—"

"The horned viper in Bryant Park!"

"Right. "greenish hue" is the color of a water viper; the Criminal Courts incident. "Shingles" or scales refers to the piranha fish. "Slippery slippers" is our friend's cute definition of water moccasin."

"Well, I got two out of four."

"That isn't good enough when you're hunting down this kind of a man, Ken. The worst is yet to come. Listen to what he hasn't released yet."

"The "rattles" and "adders" I already know. What else?"

His finger went down the page to the seventh line of verse. "Direct current" should turn out to be one or more electric eels; "hirsute limbs" will be a spider, probably a tarantula."

"I looked up Mississippiensis."

"Well, that's about it. Pretty, isn't it?"

"What about the last line, "pity the useless dinosaur?" Ken persisted.

"Oh, yes," Murphy chuckled sardonically. "That's the most frightening of all. It's meant to imply our friend's sorrow over the dinosaur's extinction. That give you some

idea of how far he'd go if it wasn't extinct?"

The telephone cut off my chance to agree with him. Murphy picked it up.

"Murphy speaking. Yes, Mr. Howard. Yes. How long ago? Good! Good!" His eyes danced with new enthusiasm. "No, you stay there in your office. I'll come right over." He hung up the phone and put on his coat and hat.

"What's up?"

"Ken, m'boy, cross your fingers," he tried to keep a small spark of excitement in check. "There might be something to print sooner than we think. Come on!" He said it on his way out the door.

"Wait a minute," I yelled. "Where are we going?"

"Metropolitan Zoo," he replied over his shoulder.

The squad car turned north on Broadway. Murphy kept the siren going full blast to save time.

"About the other lines in the verse," he said as we sped past 57th Street, "the ones that don't mention his peculiar weapons. Like the psychiatric report says, they have to do with revenge. But they represent more than that. For instance, the reference to "*official whims*" leads us to believe that the man

once was employed by the city."

"In what capacity?"

"That we don't know."

"The Metropolitan Zoo?"

"Good question." Murphy smiled. "Might be bad luck if I revealed my own hunches."

"I checked all the zoos after the first two incidents. I was told nothing was missing or had been stolen. Was that the truth or were they following police instructions?"

"No, they were telling you the truth."

"Then where the hell is this man getting things like horned vipers and water moccasins in New York? Do you know the natural habitat of the horned viper is in Egypt?"

"Ken," he paused as 72nd Street disappeared behind us like the third stage of a rocket, "you've just asked the most important question of all, and the one I haven't been able to answer for the life of me."

"You think we might also learn something about *that* at the zoo?"

"Maybe."

Murphy made a sharp right turn and stopped. The headlights framed a uniformed guard against two massive iron gates. The guard pushed the gates open. Murphy gave

it the gas and shouted thanks to him.

Not a sound could be heard through the narrow dark streets. The zoo was asleep. A three-story building loomed up ahead of us. A few scattered windows were lit. We pulled up in front of the administration building.

Another guard greeted us at the door.

"Which way to Mr. Howard's office?" Murphy wanted to know.

"This way, officer," said the guard. He ushered us through a long corridor. We came to a door marked "*Curator's Office*" and went in to find a large reception room. The woman at the typewriter figured to be Howard's secretary. Nobody bothered to ask why she was working so late. She was about thirty-five and attractive except for a hairdo and skirt that both went out with Mah Jong.

Murphy declined her offer to announce us. He strode directly into Howard's office. I stayed right behind him.

Mr. Worthington Howard, curator of the Metropolitan Zoo, was stretched out on the floor beside his desk. Murphy slammed the door shut and told me not to let anyone in. He kneeled beside the body

and unloosened the man's shirt collar. He checked the pulse and listened for a heartbeat.

Howard was dead!

I felt a warm breeze in the room. There was an open window on the other side of the room. The venetian blind had been tied off halfway up. I ran to the window and looked out over the peaceful zoo grounds. Two dim street lamps in front of the building didn't light more than a small area. A guard ambled along, whistling softly and clicking his nightstick on an iron fence that surrounded the seal pen. There was no one else in sight.

I turned away from the window. Murphy was still examining the body. I saw the spider crawling up the back of his jacket. Blood charged to my head. The rest of me seemed to be paralyzed. My throat went dry. Long, hairy legs moved slowly, cautiously. The thing looked as big as a baseball. Another ten or twelve inches and it would reach Murphy's neck and—

I couldn't think, not that there was time for it anyway. Whatever it is that puts a person at the disposal of his instincts, it went to work on me. I looked around quickly. A leather sofa, empty . . . file

cabinet . . . no weapon there . . . easy chair; no good . . . the other side of the room . . . radio . . . fishbowl . . . magazine rack . . . magazine!

I picked up the first one my hand touched and rolled it up. Murphy was too busy examining the body to see me. My arm went up and then swooped down in an arc. The magazine sent the spider sprawling along the floor and startled the hell out of the policeman. He lost his balance and teetered backwards. I grabbed his arm and yanked with everything I had. He lurched forward and fell on his shoulder.

As he scrambled to his feet the blood rushed to his head but not out of fear. "You brainless fool!"

"Take it easy!" I shouted him down. "Look what almost made a meal out of the back of your tender Irish neck."

His eyes followed my finger, pointing to the spider on the floor. "Mother of God!" The rosy color left his cheeks.

"Hirsute limbs, Murphy. Your experts were right about that too."

"Yes," he intoned softly. "If that isn't a tarantula I'll start school all over again."

The spider darted for refuge under the leather sofa.

Murphy drew his revolver and fired. The spider moved no further.

The sound of the gun brought the secretary in. She caught sight of Howard lying on the floor and let out a scream I thought would unhinge everything in the building. A guard raced through the doorway in time to catch her as she passed out.

Another shot. I whirled around.

"I thought you killed it!"

"I didn't get all of them!" Murphy sounded frantic by trying to cope with these increasing numbers.

I shouted to the guard to carry the secretary into the other office. Murphy fired again. And again!

I looked around the room and spotted about a dozen spiders scurrying all about.

"They're all over the room, Ken! We'll have to get out!" He stopped and kneeled in front of the body, keeping his gun poised. I bent over to help him drag Howard out of the room. "Leave him alone!" he ordered.

"We can't leave him in here—"

"They might be inside his clothes. I want this manila folder." The curator had a folder clutched in his fist. Murphy pried it loose. We re-

treated to the outer office, securing the door behind us.

Murphy grabbed the nearest newspaper, crumpled up several pages and used them as a wedge under the door. I wasn't able to think that coherently. My thoughts were still on the man inside. Everything had happened so fast I hadn't even given a thought to the brutal, sickening way the poor guy had been killed. My flesh crawled as I thought about it now.

It was a good thing the cop with me was as hardened a veteran as the force could boast of because I wasn't much help to him. Murphy'd had time to absorb the initial shock of his near encounter with the tarantula. Now it was time for him to act and act he did. Watching him was an education. There were at least a dozen things to do. His mind became an assembly line of snap decisions, each of them flawless.

The secretary was still unconscious.

"Take her to another room and call a doctor," he told the guard. "When she comes to keep an eye on her. She'll have to answer a few questions."

The guard picked up the woman.

"If you run into any other employees on your way," Murphy continued, "send them to this office."

The guard nodded and was gone.

Murphy went through a small telephone book on the secretary's desk. He found what he was looking for and dialed it.

"This is Captain Murphy, New York Police Department. I'm in the curator's office. Mr. Howard is dead. His office is full of poisonous spiders—" there was a pause—"I don't care how many men you bring, just get the necessary equipment over here and get it here quick!" He hung up and turned to the door.

Four uniformed men entered the room.

"How many guards, watchmen and other personnel on duty here at night," Murphy wanted to know.

A burly chap with more rank than the others answered. "Seventeen."

The Irishman grunted. "Seventeen! That isn't a hell of a lot to surround an area half the size of Central Park now, is it?" The four men wore blank stares. "Find every one of them and have them start searching the zoo. There's someone wandering around who doesn't belong

here. Is there any way to put more light on the grounds?"

"Yes, sir," the man with the rank replied.

"Good. Turn on as much light as you can. And tell your men to go in pairs. The man we're looking for is a murderer."

The guards hustled out of the room. Murphy grabbed the phone again. He dialed. "Hello! Murphy here. Send out a general alarm for—" he paused to look at the writing on the tab of the manila folder, "—for Jerome Cobler. I know the name and not another damn thing about him but he may be our snake man. That's right. Suspicion of murder. Before you do that get as many men as you can to Metropolitan Zoo. Have them surround the place. Pick up anyone who looks suspicious or happens to be more than three blocks from home. Switch me to homicide."

I walked to the desk and opened the manila envelope. It was empty. "You think the contents might be in the office?"

Murphy shook his head. "Not a chance. Whoever Jerome Cobler is he wouldn't be dumb enough to come after his biography and then leave it behind." His attention was drawn back to the phone.

"Homicide? Give me Gillis." Back to me again. "But he might be in enough of a hurry to overlook the typewritten name on the folder." Back to the phone. "Gillis? A murder, Metropolitan Zoo. The curator. Right. Right again. Okay."

Three more men entered the room. They made a bee-line for Howard's office without saying more than, "One of the guards told us about the murder."

"Don't move the body if you can help it," Murphy cautioned them.

They all wore odd looking leather hip boots. One of them carried something resembling a fire extinguisher. Another had a kind of steel net. The third carried a small adjustable cage.

The first two men barged into the curator's office like they lived there. The third man adjusted the cage to the width of the door.

It beats me what they did but it wasn't more than five minutes before a small army of frantic, scurrying spiders were falling all over each other trying to get into the cage at the door. At a signal from one of the men inside the man locked the cage, picked it up and left without a word.

The first two men came out

of Howard's office. "It's all right to go in now," said one of them.

Murphy told them they'd better stick around just in case. Then he and I went into Howard's office, but not like we lived there!

A cigarette drooped from the thin, unsmiling lips of Lieutenant Gillis of the homicide division. Half a dozen of his men were going through the curator's office like a gang of microbe hunters.

Murphy had gone to question the revived secretary. When he returned he looked like a man who'd discovered a uranium mine. He went to the secretary's personnel files. Fleet fingers sped over what appeared to be ancient records, raising dust as they went. They stopped. Murphy yanked a large brown envelope out of the drawer. He grinned and held it aloft like a trophy.

Lieutenant Gillis came in wielding a two-foot iron pipe. "Here's our good old blunt instrument," he observed dryly.

Murphy couldn't contain his excitement. "I have duplicate copies of everything that was stolen from Howard's folder!"

Gillis' face was expressionless. Excitability wasn't part

of his make-up. He was employed because other people committed murders. It wasn't, as the films have made it, a glamorous job. He never treated it that way.

The Irishman laid aside the envelope for a moment to examine the pipe. "Where'd he get hit with it?"

"Base of the skull."

"I don't understand how he could fail to hear a man coming through his window. It doesn't seem possible."

"The window was used as an exit," Gillis went on in a monotone. "Guards told us nobody was here during the dinner hour. Murderer could have walked right in and hidden himself in one of Howard's two closets. Coroner says he wasn't hit very hard with the pipe, not enough to kill him anyway."

Murphy and I looked at each other.

Gillis went on. "Pipe was used to set the stage for the spiders. They did the dirty work."

"What about prints?"

"All over the place. No effort to hide them."

The captain squinted at him, a sly smile barely perceptible on his lips. "Gillis, five'll get you ten every fingerprint in that room belongs to Jerome Cobler."

"Why the hell's he trying to make it easy for us?"

"I've wondered about that myself, Murphy," I cut in. "Seems crazy for the guy to hand all the clues in a case to the police on a silver platter. I know he's not right in the head but I thought your reports said he was clever."

Murphy broke into an open grin. "He is clever. But how's the world to know it if he doesn't get caught?"

"I see," said Gillis. "One of them."

"I don't see!"

"We've known since the beginning, when we received the first verse, that the man we want is the type with a repressed desire to be apprehended. And just in case we failed to catch him before he ran out of weapons he started sending you notes, Ken. There can only be one reason. You're a reporter with a front page byline. He's sure you'll give him A-1 coverage. And now the fingerprints all over the place. You see, he's taking no chances on not being caught."

"Eventually," Gillis added, then turned to me. "This kind is the worst to deal with. Never know what he'll do next. High sense of the dramatic, if you know what I mean. Prefers to get caught," he emphasized. "Never the

type that gives up. Not only that but he must get caught in the appropriate way, and everything with a flourish, much fanfare!" Gillis shook his head sadly. "Give me a Dillinger every time. They may be vicious but at least they know how to listen to reason when it comes to saving their own skins."

I had known about some types of criminals harboring a desire to be caught but now that I was on the trail of one of them I was dumbfounded by the fact. "He's playing a game!" I exclaimed. "A maniacal game of hide and seek—"

"Yes," Murphy pursed his lips in agreement. "Matter of fact it's entirely possible that he knew there was a duplicate set of records on him and yet he went ahead and killed poor Howard anyway, just to add one more slight complication to the game. It is frightening," Murphy sighed. "It certainly is that."

The police and zoo personnel who surrounded and searched the area were unsuccessful. Neither Gillis nor Murphy was surprised. By midnight they were aware that Jerome Cobler, if he was the madman on the loose, was more than familiar enough

with the zoo to effect a simple escape.

The envelope which contained Cobler's record as a zoo employee also contained a picture of the man. It didn't promise to be of much help because it was almost yellow with age. But at least it was a face and that was more than we had to work on before.

The face was unforgettable. Cobler, in his youth, was innocent in appearance. His face was thin and rested under a patch of unruly black hair. Wide, inquisitive eyes stared from behind steel-rimmed spectacles. Mingled with the innocence there was a feeling of suffering, of not being understood.

I kept wondering, as I looked at it, if this youth could have developed, in twenty years, into a raving maniac. I couldn't know that answer. I could only guess. Under the right circumstances, I told myself, twenty years might be enough time for anyone to become a raving maniac. Under ideal circumstances it might take only twenty minutes.

The following morning I arrived at Murphy's office to find him up to his chin in visitors. Gillis and two other detectives from homicide kept running in and out with new

information based on the contents of the manila envelope. Commissioner Davidson was there, looking like a man on the brink of losing his job.

The stranger was introduced as Professor Carl Bockhoven of the Washington Zoological Society. He was a wisp of a man with false teeth that filtered the most annoying sibilant S I'd ever heard. But he looked every inch the zoological authority. I couldn't say the same for the inert Commissioner as a criminological authority.

Bockhoven's first impression of me wasn't a very cheerful one. But that was understandable. Between thinking of tarantulas and entertaining visions of events yet to occur, I managed to get thirty minutes sleep the night before.

Jerome Cobler's records were sitting on top of the envelope on Murphy's desk.

"Everything checks," said Murphy, handing them to me. "No doubt of it anymore. Cobler's our man, Ken. Doctor Bockhoven has examined all the records and we've briefed him on the verses and the incidents involving the reptiles. He says the odds are 1,000 to 1 against it being anyone else. I'll let him tell you about it, Ken. Then I

want to ask a favor of you."

In my bleary-eyed condition I hadn't noticed that all eyes were focused on me. I began to wake up.

Bockhoven somberly approached the desk, where I was standing. "May I, for just a moment?" Sugar tong fingers lifted the records out of my hand. He spread several of the papers on Murphy's desk.

"Be my guest," I told him.

"Twenty-one years ago," he began, "it was my privilege to be the curator of the Metropolitan Zoo. My assistant during those years was Worthington Howard. Worthington was a kind and level-headed human being and one of the most conscientious men I've ever known. To my knowledge he remained such a man until his unfortunate—that is, until he was killed."

His emotions forced him to stop for a moment before he could organize his thoughts. Then he went on. "During my tenure as curator a young man worked for the zoo in the reptile house. Care and feeding and that sort of thing. However, that was merely to earn his keep. The young man's primary interest at the zoo, and in life, was the study of ophidians—"

"The study of what?" It was the Commissioner, talking when he should have been listening.

"Ophidians, sir. Snakes." Bockhoven cleared his throat and continued. "The man's name was Jerome Cobler. There wasn't a creature in the zoo he didn't know everything about, but ophid—snakes were his first love. I remember he was fond of claiming that, by devoting his whole life to them, he would someday be the world's foremost authority." A wistful smile played on the old professor's lips. But in a split second it was crowded away by a paternal, troubled frown that seemed to beg the question, *What could have come over a sensitive, intelligent boy like Jerome Cobler?*

"Worthington Howard," he went on, "was extremely fond of Jerome. Regarded him more or less as a protege and truly believed the boy had a brilliant future. As time went on Worthington entrusted him with more responsibility. And that was when Jerome's passion for snakes went a step too far. One day he told Worthington that his new responsibilities required more work and more of his time. Couldn't the zoo see its way clear to granting him a raise?

Worthington agreed with the boy, thought he deserved more money and promised to get it. Our budget in those days was frightfully modest but Worthington came to see me and argued strenuously in Jerome's favor. During our discussion, as fortune would have it, the curator of reptiles called to tell me rather frantically that nine snakes were missing. I remember vividly how that terrible news struck Worthington Howard. He said nothing at the time, but I could see he feared the worst. A hasty investigation uncovered all of the snakes in the basement of Jerome Cobler's home. The boy protested solemnly that he had never meant to keep the snakes, but Worthington was deeply hurt and angered by what he had done. And that it was uncovered on the day he had argued so vociferously for the raise only compounded the injury. In the blindness of his rage Worthington told the boy he would be discharged. He ordered him never to set foot inside the zoo again."

"Do you believe that one incident was enough to bring him to this?" I asked.

"Well, there was one earlier incident which might have more significance today than it did then."

"What was it?"

"Once, during visiting hours, he brought a huge poisonous snake, the species skips my mind at the moment, out into the open for closer inspection by the spectators. We were naturally alarmed over the possible danger to a visitor—"

The Commissioner cut him off. "You mean after he did a thing like that you kept him on and ran the risk of letting it happen again?"

Bockhoven sounded a trifle indignant. "It was entirely conceivable to us that a boy as intensely involved as Jerome was in his work, could quite innocently fail to understand the implications of what he had done. For instance, he was genuinely perplexed when the spectators fled at the sight of a snake out of its glass case. His naivete was such that he believed the spectators' reaction was based on a lack of confidence in his ability to handle the snake, and not on the inherent fear of the snake itself."

"Isn't it possible," I asked, "that Cobler will stop what he's been doing now that Worthington Howard is dead?"

"I'm afraid not," Bockhov-

en concluded. "You see, after he was discharged from the zoo he appealed his case to the board of trustees. The appeal was denied. Since the zoo is owned by the city, Jerome kept appealing all the way up to the mayor himself. In every instance he lost. Consequently—"

"Never mind," I said, "that answers the question. But something else has bothered me from the beginning, Doctor. Where is this man finding or obtaining such dangerous creatures? I'm not a zoologist but I do know the water moccasin, the rattlesnake, water viper and tarantula are found in widely separated regions of the south. The natural habitat of the horned viper is Egypt; the piranha fish and electric eel, Brazil; the adder is found in Europe. Assuming he could have caught them himself which I'm sure is unlikely, the cost of traveling to those places would cost a pretty penny."

An indulgent smile played on the doctor's mouth. "Outside of the piranha fish, which can be purchased as a pet, the only logical answer to me is that Jerome Cobler took all of these creatures from the Metropolitan Zoo."

"Nothing has been missing

from the zoo. Murphy checked that and was told—"

"I didn't say he took them *recently*, Mr. Summers. Before last night he hadn't been inside the zoo in twenty years."

"Now wait a minute." Murphy held up his hand for the professor to slow down and make sense. "You can't be referring to the snakes he took home with him then, because you told us he returned all of them." He cocked his head to one side and frowned. "Isn't that right?"

I was glad somebody was as confused as I was.

"Yes, but that occasion has nothing to do with my theory. Jerome was in a position of trust. Consequently he had a great deal of freedom in his work. There was no reason to supervise someone as devoted and conscientious as he was. He could not steal snakes without being caught. But he never would have been suspected by a soul if he chose to steal eggs!"

"That's incredible!" barked the Commissioner. "Are you trying to tell us he took snake eggs home with him, was able to hatch them and has cared for them all these years—"

"It is not in the least incredible, Mr. Commissioner. The boy knew his subject.

He'd have had no trouble erecting adequate housing for them, feeding them the proper foods, even creating the natural atmospheric conditions for each individual species. And, if my theory is correct, gentlemen, I regret to have to inform you he'd have had no trouble breeding them."

"Mother of God!" cried Murphy. "After twenty years there's no telling how many he might have by now. They could overrun the city!"

"Remember," cautioned the professor, "I said *if* my theory is correct."

The telephone rang.

"Murphy speaking!"

The Irishman's jaw tightened. His big hand gripped the receiver until I thought it would crumble.

"How many, man! How many!!" His face turned a deep crimson.

The rest of us gathered around the phone like men waiting to hear a list of dead and wounded.

"All right," Murphy barked into the phone, "surround the park! I'll be there in five minutes!" He slammed the receiver down. His words filtered through gritted teeth. "Rattlesnakes. God only knows how many of them. All over the mall in Central Park. Our

boys killed two dozen of them."

"Two dozen!" Bockhoven couldn't seem to believe the figure. But he knew as well as the rest of us that it went a long way toward substantiating his theory.

"Where in Central Park?" I asked.

"Three hundred people were enjoying a band concert on the mall," said the stunned captain. "Fifteen were bitten. What does that mean, Professor? How many of them will die?"

Bockhoven shook his head. "That depends on how fast your men worked and how soon medical help arrived. I don't know."

Murphy reached for his hat. "Well, we're going to find out. The danger isn't over yet. They don't know how many of the snakes got away."

Outside the station Bockhoven joined the Commissioner. Murphy took me in his car.

By the time we arrived three more snakes had been killed. Luckily there had been no further human casualties.

The mall looked like it had been struck by a hurricane. In their panic the spectators had overturned all the chairs. A few chairs had been crush-

ed. On the small stage music stands had toppled over and sheet music was strewn everywhere. Four ice cream push-wagons had been turned over, their contents left to melt under the unmerciful sun.

The fifteen snake bite cases had all been removed to Lenox Hill Hospital. Eventually twelve of them pulled through.

A total of five hundred police surrounded and searched the park. Seventy-three people were arrested on suspicion.

Jerome Cobler was not among them.

Murphy saw the handwriting on the wall. It was only a matter of time before every newspaper in town would add two and two and come up with an ugly four. They'd jump down his throat demanding to know why the information had been kept under wraps.

"Ken, you've been in on this from the beginning," he said as we drove back to the 42nd Street Precinct. Knowing the facts as you do, you're in a better position than the next reporter to handle this thing responsibly. And it must be handled that way, you understand that, don't you?"

"Just the truth, Murphy.

No gory sensationalism," I assured him.

"I won't be able to stall the others for very long, m'boy. You'd better get busy."

At Murphy's office I picked up all the available data on Jerome Cobler. I took it with me to the *Daily Messenger* and went to work on it.

The three other morning papers, *The Telegraph*, *Herald* and *Record-Transcript*, had their early editions on the street by ten o'clock that night. They all devoted headlines to the mysterious episode in Central Park.

The Daily Messenger hit the street at ten-twenty with a two-inch EXCLUSIVE! under its masthead. Then came the factual story of Jerome Cobler. Cobler's youthful picture was centered below the headline and was captioned, WHERE IS THIS MAN TODAY?

The *Messenger* offered a \$1,000 reward for information leading to his arrest, but warned anyone who knew of his whereabouts or who saw or came in contact with him, that he was capable of murder.

By midnight the *Messenger*'s switchboard was jammed with calls. Murphy called to say the police phones were

equally busy. Most of the calls, however, were of little value.

I spent the next day with Murphy, waiting hopefully for something to open up. The police department and the Chamber of Commerce helped matters by offering additional rewards, fattening the total to \$5,000.

The phone calls continued to pour in but when the sludge of misinformation was drained off, genuine facts were few and far between. An elderly, ex-landlady of Cobler called in a forwarding address and offered the observation, "He seemed like such a nice boy." The forwarding address was accurate but Cobler had long since moved to still another residence.

A Bronx butcher reported that Cobler used to be one of his best customers but he hadn't seen him in over a year. The manager of a pet store reported selling a piranha fish to a man he was certain had been Cobler. How long ago? he was asked. Six months. Did he know Cobler's present address? No.

There were the usual calls from cranks who professed to be Cobler, and from the self-styled comedians who claimed that Cobler was really their

mother-in-law or the office boss. At least five hundred people, from almost as many different locations, reported seeing Cobler and his snakes not ten minutes before they called. And there were those who reported the madman was lurking in their building and would the police come immediately and haul him away.

Jerome Cobler was getting the attention he wanted and not all of it was via the telephone. The fear mongers charged the police with unprincipled complacency. The political extremists had a field day. Accusations were as plentiful as ants at a picnic and twice as irresponsible. Some said Cobler was a Communist. Others said he wasn't a Communist but claimed certain members of the police department were. The Communists naturally argued that Cobler was the deranged victim of capitalism.

Murphy's men followed up one lead after another over the week end and got nowhere. They did find plenty of people who had known the man but none had seen him in recent months.

On Monday the first real break was dumped into our laps.

I was sifting through a mountain of information on

the Irishman's desk. After a week end that included a mere three hours sleep, Murphy was relaxing in his swivel chair, his feet resting on the desk and his massive hands locked behind his head. He was a study in exhaustion. Not a spark of the old cheer remained and the lilting rhythm was missing from his brogue. When the knock came he muttered, "Come in" without even looking to see who it was.

"Excuse me, Captain," said the young cop in the doorway, "there's a man wants to see you—"

"There's a man I want to see too," said the captain, sardonically, "but I can't seem to find him to arrange an appointment."

"This man's name is Clyde Burke. He's an importer and he said—"

"An importer of what?"

"Well," the cop looked puzzled, "I don't know but he said he wants to talk to you about alligators."

Murphy sprang out of his chair. "Send him in here!"

The hesitant little man who almost tiptoed into the room was middle-aged and had a perpetual look of worry on his face. He kept looking behind to his right and left as though he thought someone

was about to clobber him with a baseball bat.

Murphy politely requested that he get right to the point.

Burke explained that his business was importing tropical plants and fish which he then sold to pet stores. "Occasionally, however, I arrange for shipments of baby alligators. These are not necessary to import, you understand."

"I understand," said Murphy.

"And this part of my business is transacted only on request. I rarely do business with individual pet owners but six years ago a man came to my office and wanted to know if I could purchase six baby alligators for him. Some people do have alligators as pets, you know, but I did think it was strange he wanted that many."

"I should think so," said Murphy.

"Well, I arranged for the delivery and didn't feel it was my business to ask questions. Then the other day I saw that man's picture in the paper and, even though alligators weren't mentioned in the story, I seemed to recognize the face and I just wondered if it might be—" He stopped cold and looked worried again. "I wouldn't want to get

the wrong man into trouble, you understand."

Murphy told him he understood perfectly, gave the man a pat on the back for contributing a public service and got rid of him. He placed a call to Professor Bockhoven's hotel and told the old boy to get a cab and come over.

"I don't know. I just don't know." Bockhoven paced back and forth in front of the desk. "It *could* be Cobler. He'd have had no trouble raising the alligators, although I can hardly believe they'd grow to their full length in this climate."

"How long do they get?" I asked.

"Fourteen feet," came the answer, and it stopped the conversation for a moment of reverent meditation. "But assuming he kept all five of them and they grew, oh, let's say only ten feet long, I can't imagine *where* he kept them. I just don't understand—"

His voice trailed off. I couldn't help but notice there was a sadness in the old man. Two people from out of his past, one a madman and the other his victim, had succeeded in injecting a note of personal failure into the professor's thoughts.

"Suppose it *was* Cobler

who bought the alligators six years ago?" Murphy asked. "And suppose he had ideas about releasing them now?"

"Where?"

"Once before he managed to cause a water main break which flooded a small mid-town area. If he could do it again would the alligators exist in that kind of water?"

Are you referring to sewer water?"

"Yes."

"I don't think they could exist in it for very long, but the amount of water would be sufficient for them to move about freely long enough to cause considerable damage."

"What are you driving at?" I asked Murphy.

He placed the ten lines of verse on the desk in front of us. Beside the verse was a list of the nine creatures mentioned.

"Look at it," said Murphy, beaming. "Of the first eight creatures mentioned here we've already come to grips with seven."

He was right. Only the electric eel had failed to materialize in any of Cobler's schemes to date.

"The appearance of every other creature did *not* coincide with its numerical reference in the verse. But what do you want to bet the alliga-

tor is mentioned last for a damn good reason?"

"Well, of course it is," I pointed out. "The next to last line is self-explanatory. *Mississipiensis* will complete the chore."

Bockhoven muttered a response without looking at us. "The *Mississipiensis* is the largest of all. And he has five of them!"

Murphy said, "You see my point, Ken?"

I saw his point. It wouldn't be long before the eels put in their deadly appearance. Then, with all of the "minor" skirmishes out of the way, Cobler would be ready to bring up his big guns. The alligators represented his shock troops. He'd been saving them for his grandest maneuver.

But when and where would they appear? If Murphy had hit upon something we knew it would be soon and probably in the busiest section of the city Cobler could arrange it for.

Two days passed without incident. The barrage of phone calls kept coming, most of them giving useless information.

I kept in touch with the *Messenger* for any possible break in the mail. Corrine had

been trying to see me ever since the exclusive story came out in the *Messenger*. I'd been stalling her for four days. She was furious. It was obvious that, after the Cobler story was over, I'd have another tough job on my hands trying to patch up an engagement.

The envelope with *Jerome Cobler* printed boldly in the upper lefthand corner arrived on Wednesday. There was no return address under the name. I opened it. Another piece of brown wrapping paper. Another verse.

*Seven word, none are fables,
In the estate of seven cables.
The Winter of Day is three.
Aurora is four, periodically.*

*Spokesman and sage, disperse
opinions
but only a word is for the
minions.*

*Spread abroad a proclamation
but only a letter for dissemina-
tion.*

*Mercury, sprint! Gabriel,
blow!
Naught but a solitary word
will show.*

*Midst the echo's facsimile is
found
Yet another word, a single
sound.*

*An added letter confounds
the maze
Between the set and explicit
phrase.*

*Consult the worldly Sphinx
to find
an important word, the tell-
tale kind.*

*Then a letter of rotundity
in a sphere of influence and
profundity.*

I must have read it eight times before I picked up the phone and dialed. After the precinct operator answered I read the thing again while I waited for Murphy. I couldn't make heads or tails of the damr thing but I was excited nevertheless.

"Murphy!" I shouted into the phone. "I just opened my mail and—"

"I know, Ken. We got one too. You'd better come right over."

The captain's office was crowded again. His own analysts had been at work on the latest verse all morning. Two cryptographers, on loan from the army, arrived just before I did. They were in a huddle with Murphy's men. Open reference books were strewn everywhere. There were pencils and half-used writing

tablets all over the desk. Crumpled sheets of paper, wrong guesses I imagined, littered the floor.

Murphy maneuvered me into a corner. "If you'll just tell me what it means, Ken, I'll send the boys home." There was a gleam in his eye that left me puzzled.

"Very funny. What's the matter, haven't they gotten anywhere with this one?" I was amazed.

"They know what the verse is intended to mean but they don't know what it says."

"You lost me, Murphy."

"Cobler himself has provided us with the answer, Ken. All we have to do is unscramble it. Let me see your copy. I don't want to interrupt the geniuses at work."

I reached into my inside coat pocket and took out the verse. "Then the psychiatrists were right. He really does have the compulsion to be caught."

"Oh, indeed!" He pointed to the verse, running his finger along the paper as he explained. "The first four lines are a key of some kind. That seems to be the only reason they're set off from the others. Once we figure out the key the rest should be easy."

"Murphy, how can you be

sure of this if you don't know what the verse says?"

"The analysts have checked and rechecked a hundred times. They're positive there isn't a single mention, hidden or otherwise, of snakes, spiders or fish. So you see this verse is not a warning in the sense that the first one was."

"In other words, he's preparing for the final assault. The theory you evolved the other day was right."

He held up his hand and said, modestly, "No credit until we catch him, please. The fact is Cobler obviously has nothing left after he pulls off his bloodiest trick. If he doesn't get proper credit then, he runs the risk of not being caught and sinking back into oblivion. So, in his own warped way, he devised a method of giving us a fair chance. It was a bold move to take but he couldn't resist it. Unless every known method of analysis is wrong this verse tells us where and when he'll strike next."

"I see. And his ego is at stake as well."

Murphy frowned. "What do you mean?"

"If what you say is true, it seems to me he's playing a dangerous game of double or nothing. Break down the verse and you'll catch Cobler

and possibly prevent the most diabolical plot of all. But fail to break down the verse and Cobler's victory will be twice as potent."

"I hadn't thought of it that way."

"How long do you think it'll take your men to crack it?"

"Before the day is over," said Murphy with an air of supreme confidence.

"Suppose Cobler has it in mind to strike within the next hour or two?"

"He won't do that."

"How do you know?"

His confidence heightened with the appearance of a sly grin. "He hasn't used the eels yet, Ken. This man follows a pattern. He won't be able to execute the final attack until all of his lesser weapons have been exhausted. The idea is to break down the verse *before* he uses those eels. Then we'll be ahead of him."

The eel incident occurred the following afternoon. Luckily it was the least damaging of all of Jerome Cobler's insane schemes. He had somehow been able to plant them in the small lake in Central Park. A young couple, paddling their canoe in the middle of the lake, found three wild ducks floating in the

water. They were all dead. Close to where they'd seen the ducks they spotted what they thought was a water snake. When they reported it Murphy had the lake dragged and the police, with the help of zoo officials, came up with six electric eels.

So the eel incident was out of the way.

But Murphy's experts were still stumped! It was Friday, the day after the eels, and the answer to Cobler's crazy riddle remained a mystery. No matter how many times they went over it they always came up with the same number of clues and nothing more.

Murphy's hopes grew dimmer. By noon on Friday he had placed two thousand policemen and two thousand auxiliary civilians on duty to guard every manhole and sewer in the city. His analysts were working on borrowed time and he knew it. He could thank his lucky stars that Cobler had not yet made his move.

The two of us sat glumly in his office, smoking one cigarette after another as we watched the men poring over the volumes of notes they had taken. The room was silent, tense. Occasionally the rustling of papers, two or three

of the men muttering among themselves. The clock ticked away the minutes, bringing Cobler's big moment closer and closer.

Murphy catapulted out of his chair, smashing the silence and startling everyone in the room. "Ken!! I may have something!!"

"What, for God's sake?"

"In the first line, no, the second line it is," he bubbled excitedly, "the estate of seven cables. What about the Fourth Estate?"

The analysts looked at each other uncertainly. I pondered it for a moment.

"Seven cables," I muttered. "Seven newspapers in this city—"

"Hold it," said one of the analysts. "What's the breakdown on those papers?"

"What do you mean?"

"Isn't it three evening papers and four morning papers?"

"Yes."

"That must be it!" he shouted. He held up the verse for all to see. "Look. *The winter of day is three*. Winter of day could mean night or evening. *Aurora is four, periodically*. Aurora means dawn or morning. Four morning papers, three evening papers."

"Now wait a minute!" one

of the other men warned. "Before we all get too excited let's make sure it checks."

"I think it will," I said, glancing over the whole verse. "The rest of the verse is divided into seven stanzas. In the key there is the reference to seven words. And in each stanza there is a reference to just one word or letter."

"So what does the key tell us?" asked Murphy. He spread his palm out, as if he was about to count on his fingers. "In the seven daily newspapers there are seven words? That doesn't make sense."

"Sure it does," I insisted. "The seven stanzas indicate that there is just one word in each paper."

One analyst agreed. "And if we find those words we'll have the answer."

"That's right."

Murphy scratched his head and seemed depressed again. "You mean we've got to pore over seven metropolitan newspapers just for seven lousy words? Cobler could kill us all before we find them."

"I don't think it'll be that difficult," I told him. "If this is the kind of a bold move you thought it was, Murphy, then Cobler will place those words in the papers as advertise-

ments. And they'll be where we can find them. Don't you see, the verse was the thing that was meant to baffle us, not the seven words themselves."

"By God, I think you're right, Ken. We'd better pray like hell the words haven't already appeared."

Murphy sent a cop out for copies of all the dailies.

To be doubly sure of the solution we'd found we all went over the seven stanzas of the verse again. It wasn't long before everything fell into place.

During their previous efforts to break down the verse the analysts had, at one point, copied down all the important looking words. They typed them on a sheet of paper and beside each word was a short list of its synonyms, culled from dictionary, thesaurus and encyclopedia.

Now that we knew the key, that list made a lot of sense. In each stanza, it developed, there was at least one important word which had, as one of its synonyms, the name of a newspaper.

Spokesman and sage referred to the Morning Herald.

Proclamation was an obscure synonym for *Telegraph*.

Mercury, Gabriel: both referred to in the encyclopedia as messengers. My own paper.

Echo and facsimile: both synonyms for *Transcript*, a morning tabloid.

Explicit or set phrase meant express or in express terms. (*The Evening Express*)

Sphinx: One definition is "monitor." The worldly Sphinx surely meant the *World-Monitor*.

Sphere of Influence: Globe or globular. (*The Evening Globe*)

Silence fell over the room again when the papers arrived. Each of us took a different paper and went to work on it in microscopic detail. We got nowhere.

Murphy thought we should take one paper at a time, work as a team and go over it inch by inch. We tried it. Still nothing.

One of the analysts suggested getting a week of back issues in case the seven words had already appeared and we'd missed them.

"Mother of God!" cried Murphy. "That'll take all night."

I kicked the side of Murphy's desk with my foot. "Damn it to hell!" I shouted, picking up the phone. "What kind of a moron am I anyway!"

"What's wrong, Ken?"

"We'll have those words in ten minutes, Murphy."

The *Messenger* operator's voice came through with its familiar staccato sound.

"This is Ken Summers. Get me advertising, George Daniels." I turned to Murphy. "If the word clues haven't already appeared they should be due to appear in the next two or three editions. Cobler would have to give advertising the word before they could put it into an advertisement, wouldn't he?"

George Daniels, the advertising manager, came to the phone. He knew right off the bat that no one word ads had appeared all week. I asked him if any were coming up.

In sixty seconds we knew the word that would appear in the Saturday morning edition of the *Daily Messenger*.

The word was *Silences*.

Murphy placed the other six calls himself. Each advertising manager was quick to comply.

Ten minutes later we had all seven words and a new

problem. We didn't know their order.

Silences, A., Weekend, Majority, O., P., and Death, were the order in which we received them.

Another unscrambling process began.

This time it was much easier. The analysts were quick to conclude that, since Cobler had a penchant for rhymes, there must be two words that sounded alike. This brought up the question of the three letters and what they stood for. Through the process of elimination we found a word beginning with A (authority) that rhymed with majority. The letters P.O.A. stood for Port of Authority.

With that we proceeded to put the rest together in short order. The result: *Week end P.O.A. Death Silences Majority*.

"The Port of Authority building!" Murphy exclaimed. "What a choice! The week end traffic, thousands of commuters, an ideal time and place for wholesale panic. Well, Mr. Cobler is in for a surprise."

He dismissed the analysts and gazed thoughtfully out the window. After due deliberation he snapped his fingers and said, "No, not a small surprise! A big one!! We'll put

on a show that'll make Cobler look like a piker!"

Captain Murphy accomplished a herculean feat over that week end. If Cobler had not shown, it might have been the greatest waste of individual human effort in history.

He was certain that Cobler would not make his move until all the word clues had appeared in the papers. Since the Saturday evening papers didn't hit the stands until one o'clock the next day Murphy figured he had almost twenty-four hours grace.

He was equally certain that the madman would not waste a second once the papers were out.

Friday night he called an emergency meeting of high police officials, Port of Authority executives and the heads of several transportation companies that used P.O.A. facilities. The plan he outlined left them aghast. It was impossible, they claimed. There just wasn't enough time for a counter-move of such scope. Murphy told them they'd have to manufacture the time or run the risk of being responsible for untold havoc. They had little choice but to agree.

A whole series of meetings followed, lasting until the

early hours on Saturday. Murphy first outlined the plan to two thousand policemen, then to two thousand auxiliary policemen. Next he met with a group of five hundred bus drivers. Then the four hundred employees and shop owners who made a living inside the great Port of Authority terminal.

When he was through each of these five thousand people had a job to perform. They were all to participate as actors in one of the most colossal shows ever staged.

The Port of Authority terminal was a block wide and two blocks long. At noon on Saturday the P.O.A. manager turned over his mezzanine-floor office to Murphy and a dozen other police officials. A large picture window offered a perfect view of the street below. From an inside window it was possible to observe everything that happened on the main floor of the terminal.

At 1:05 the *Globe* called to say its first edition had just left the printing room. It was the last of the evening papers to hit the street.

The stage was set.

Murphy was ready.

Five thousand "assistants" had been oriented and were poised for action.

It was all up to Cobler. Murphy looked at his watch. 1:25. He looked out over the spacious main floor of the terminal. Long, steady lines formed at the ticket windows. The information booths were jammed with anxious week end commuters. Two great stairways and four escalators were mobbed with incoming and outgoing travelers. Ordinary, everyday citizens, most of them without a care in the world. No hint of impending disaster was visible.

Murphy crossed to the outside window and checked the scene on the street. It was hot and humid outside. The pedestrians went about their business, unconcerned with anything except the weather, unaware that terror was about to strike.

Murphy wanted it to look that way and that's the way it looked.

But it was all as phoney as a seven-dollar-bill!

There were no commuters inside the terminal. There were no pedestrians on the street. A keen eye would have noticed that the men in the area outnumbered women by about 15 to 1, but Murphy had them well integrated. Pedestrians and commuters alike were all cops. They were

all armed to the teeth, including the women.

Everyone of them was waiting for Jerome Cobler to make his move.

On Saturday morning Murphy had begun the difficult task of gradually removing all innocent citizens out of the area and replacing them, as subtly as possible, with civilian-dressed policemen and women. All legitimate transportation into and out of the terminal had been rerouted as of noon. Buses still arrived and left on schedule but their passengers were just more cops in disguise.

Every shopowner in the area had been instructed to behave as though business was normal. At the sound of a specially installed alarm their shops would empty of their "casual" police customers. Then they would lock their doors and stay inside until the all-clear was given. The same orders applied to the bus drivers.

No set of movie extras ever responded more efficiently or as organically as did Murphy's small army of emergency helpers.

The explosion occurred at 1:43. Pieces of hot asphalt went hurtling into the air by the side of the building. A huge crater appeared in the

street, sending tons of water gushing into the area. Within minutes the area was flooded. Water began pouring into the main floor of the terminal.

True to Murphy's script, the "crowd" behaved like a crowd. A squad of uniformed police arrived, as per schedule, to take the situation in hand.

We had so far learned how Cobler was preparing for the alligators. The time bomb must have been planted several days before.

But where were the alligators themselves? We knew there was no way any human being could get five of the ten-foot monsters below street level.

There was a medium-sized, open-back truck parked across the street. The back was covered with a tarpaulin. It looked so much like a natural part of the scene that no one had paid any attention to it.

Murphy was the first to realize there was a man in the cab of the truck. When the swirling water on the street had reached the two-foot level the man climbed out of the cab and hoisted himself to the top of the truck.

The Irishman grabbed a pair of binoculars and got a closer look. "Whoever he is,

he needs a shave bad. Let's see what he's up to." He handed the glasses to me.

I saw a small middle-aged man. His hands and face were grimy, his unmatched coat and trousers were badly in need of repair. There was a faraway look in his eyes, as though he was unaware of what was going on around him. He reached down with anxious, trembling fingers to rip the tarpaulin from the back of the truck.

Murphy yelled his name through a megaphone.

Cobler jerked his head from side to side, his eyes darting in every direction, trying to locate the voice that had spotted him. His fingers clawed at the tarpaulin. It began to come loose.

"It's him all right," said Murphy. "And I don't need a swami to tell me what's under that tarpaulin."

He fired a shot in the air. Cobler kept working at the huge tarpaulin. It was half-way off now and the massive glass case it had concealed was almost fully visible.

Once the tarpaulin was removed Cobler would have to walk along the top of the glass case to the rear of the truck, unlatch the door of the case and the five ferocious alliga-

tors would go scrambling to the street.

The tarpaulin came off.

It was too late for another warning. Murphy gave the order to fire.

Cobler, running along the top of the glass case, was met by a barrage of hot lead. Miraculously he reached his destination, bent down and began to pry open the latch. Murphy gave the order again. Another deadly volley of gunfire stopped the madman. Cobler's bullet-torn, writhing body fell backward with full force to shatter the glass case. He disappeared among the five snarling, hungry beasts.

But now the case was open. One by one they tumbled out of the case into the street.

There was a steady ten-minute roar of gunfire. The baffled, half-crazed creatures thrashed madly in the water.

In fifteen minutes they had all been killed.

The only human casualty had been Jerome Cobler.

The headlines that night played up the way Cobler had died. I couldn't help thinking, as I read them, of what Professor Bockhoven had once said. "Jerome planned to devote his whole life to his reptiles. A truly dedicated boy."

The irony of that was anything but sweet. THE END

THE ELEVENTH PLAGUE

By HENRY SLESAR

ILLUSTRATOR NOVICK

One man ruled a deserted planet, and five men came to dispossess him. Heavy odds? Not for a magician who knew one more plague than Moses did. . . .

"CHOOSE your men carefully," Deegan said. "Choose five faces you can look at for the next three years. Choose five voices you can listen to. Choose five temperaments you can put up with during those long months. That's my advice, Captain Saylor. And I recommend you use it."

Captain Joel Saylor hid his reaction to his superior officer's speech under a mask of military indifference. He kept his back stiff against the chair, his strong-jawed face implacable. He played the part nicely; he had all the outward characteristics of a seasoned soldier accustomed to taking tough assignments in stride. But he was twenty-three years old; he hadn't spent enough time on Earth to feel

assurance about a long duty in space.

"I'm serious," the Colonel said. "I had a similar tour when I was on active space duty. We had an outpost on Io, and I chose the crew myself. I was pretty cocky about it; I picked the best damn high-rated men in the outfit. A real crack crew, Captain. But I didn't pay any attention to temperament, and by the end of the first year, one of my men had killed another, and the rest hated each other so much that the entire project had to be abandoned. So don't worry about service records so much, Captain; pick guys you can live with."

Joel said nothing, and his silence seemed to irritate the old man.

"Something wrong? Think

I'm making too much of this?"

"No, sir. I was just waiting to hear more about the assignment."

Deegan grunted. "Well, you know the basic story. You and your men have to set up a permanent or semi-permanent station on Planet A15 in the Antara system. You will construct a radio station to provide free contact both with Earth and with ships in the vicinity. You'll provide an emergency landing area for ships in distress, but not a way-station. To do all this, you'll have to spend many months in astronomical observation in order to keep track of all conditions involving space traffic. You will also make observations of a general nature to provide information for Central Space Traffic. And," the Colonel said, with a wry grin, "you'll do any damn thing else we ask you to do. That's the broad idea; there'll be a four-week briefing session for you and your men, as soon as you've determined who they are."

"Will that be all, Colonel?"

"For now, yes. I'd suggest you start collecting service records this afternoon. And take my advice—don't be

overly impressed by statistics. Get out and meet your men. Talk to them, drink with them, pick fights with them—"

"There are psychological ratings, of course," Joel said, trying to be nonchalant.

"Yes, there are those." Deegan frowned, and then sighed. "I've got a feeling I'm talking in vain, Captain. I've got a hunch that you're going to make the same mistakes I did. But that's your privilege, Captain, you're still young." He hoisted eyebrows. "Just how young are you. Captain Saylor? Thirty?"

Joel swallowed. "Twenty-six, sir."

The man at the desk shook his head.

"Another boy wonder," he said sadly. "This damn Army never learns. All right, *Captain*—" He put ironic emphasis on the rank—"Choose your men carefully, and get their requisitions into my office by the end of the month. And I wish you luck."

"Thank you, sir," the Captain said stiffly.

It was a different Joel Saylor who idled in the hammock on the front lawn of Helen Mitchell's house in Roanoke, one long leg dangling over the side. From her living room



This was Corsini's world and only he would rule it.

window, Helen looked out and watched the way the sunlight reflected on his blond head, on the light hairs of his bare chest and arms. Her eyes went misty, and the mist made their violet depths lovelier than ever. Then the melancholy mood passed, and she came out of the house carrying a frost-ed jug.

"That's a beautiful tan you're getting," she said as she approached. "Think the girls on A15 will appreciate it? Or don't they have girls?"

Joel grinned at her. There was no question of his age now; he looked his young years.

"No girls at all on A15. Didn't you know? Only pink elephants with purple spots." He poured himself a tall drink, but its alcohol content didn't sustain his lighthearted mood. "I wish there were pink elephants. Better than nothing at all."

"Is it really that bad?"

"Nobody knows much about it. The scouting party made only a tentative exploration, just enough to determine its habitability, its Earth-type atmosphere and temperature. But we do know that there's no animal life, and only some curious vegetation. It's hardly anything more than a ball of granite with

green tufts on it. Not exactly a country club."

Helen touched his shoulder gently.

"My poor Joel. Do you have to take the assignment?"

"I don't have to. But it's my first chance for real space service. Everybody says it's a break for me, at my age. I can't afford not to take it."

"A break . . ." the girl said sadly.

"The big question now is the men."

He swung his legs over the side of the hammock and walked barefooted to the table on the edge of the swimming pool. There was a manila envelope lying there; he lifted out the sheet of paper inside, and read it for the tenth time that day.

Lt. Carlos Esquilla, Co-Pilot. Age 24. 4 years interstellar experience. Class rank: 4. Psych. Rating: Excellent.

Lt. Gary Flack, Co-Pilot. Age 25. 4 years interstellar experience. Class rank: 8. Psych. rating: Excellent.

Lt. Nelson Palmer, Navigator. Age 22. 3 years interstellar experience. Class rank: 3. Psych. Rating: Good to Excellent.

Lt. Daniel Fisher, Radio-man, Astronomer. Age 23. 4 years interstellar experience.

Class rank: 1. Psych. Rating: Good.

Sergeant William Bart, General Crewman. Age 25. 5 years interstellar experience. Psych. Rating: Good.

"Are you sure about them?" Helen said softly.

"What?"

"The men you picked. Are you sure you can get along with them? It's a long time to be alone on a strange world . . ."

"You sound like Colonel Deegan," Joel snorted. "They're all top men, excellent service records, good psych. ratings. I know they're okay."

But once more he studied the list, while the girl who wanted to marry him, and who would have to postpone her plans for three long years, watched his troubled face.

Colonel Deegan slid shut the wall chart on the briefing room blackboard, and frowned at the six-man audience confronting him.

"That's the broad picture of the problems you'll find on World A15. But there's one more you'll have to take care of." The grim mouth softened for a moment. "A rather unusual problem, but it shouldn't give you any trouble. You'll have to dispossess someone."

Joel looked perplexed.

"Dispossess? You mean there's somebody *living* there?"

"That's right. Around the year 2043, as some of you may remember, there was a great deal of wildcat merchant ships beachcombing the Antara system, after false rumors about gold and silver had been spread. Some of the ship captains tried to establish property rights on the more hospitable worlds, but the United Space Federation quickly declared their claims illegal. Nobody "owns" the worlds of Antara, or any other star system. However, one of these vessels left a passenger on A15—one version of the story says he was marooned there. He's been there ever since, surviving God knows how. His name is Corsini, and from what I gather from the intelligence reports, he's more than a little mad." Deegan grunted. "After fourteen years of isolation, I guess that's not surprising."

He looked at the men. Their expressions ranged from amused interest on the part of co-pilot Gary Flack, a handsome young man with a cynical mouth, to a dark scowl on the pinched face of Sergeant Will Bart.

Joel cleared his throat. "What are we supposed to do with him, sir?"

"You're to take him into custody, and put him on the first supply ship that will be arriving on A15 after your base is established—approximately two months from date of landfall. He'll be returned to Earth, and given the proper care and treatment. The assignment shouldn't be difficult. The supposition is that he's made himself a self-styled king of the planet, so he may require some humoring. Deegan permitted himself a twinkle. "Perhaps you can tell him that Earth government wants to give him an official welcome, as ruler of another sovereign power."

Gary Flack laughed aloud. Lt. Palmer, a puckish redhead with a mischievous grin, chuckled. The others remained impassive, except that Sergeant Bart's scowl deepened.

"I don't mean to make light of this problem," Deegan said. "It's important that this mental defective be removed from A15, so he can't cause any difficulty to our operation. There isn't much else we know about him, except that he was a magician on Earth—"

"A magician?" Palmer said. "Sounds like fun. Maybe we

ought to keep him around, sir, just for amusement."

"What was the name again?" Joe asked.

"Corsini. Corsini, the Great, of course; that's how he billed himself. You won't have any trouble recognizing him." He smiled. "That takes care of today's session. There'll be a navigational briefing tomorrow morning at 0800. I expect all of you to attend."

There was a party in the rear of the camp recreation hall the night before Captain Joel Saylor and his crew were scheduled for blast-off to their 3-year vigil in space. The party was a tradition. It was the custom to get roaring drunk, blasphemous, brawling; it was expected that there would be wild singing, and rioting, and fist fights; it was supposed to be inevitable that it would climax in what Colonel Deegan delicately referred to as "wenching."

But the party Joel Saylor gave his men never seemed to get started on the proper, or improper, note. Lt. Palmer, the mischievous redhead, was the only one who felt like laughing and drinking heavily and cracking jokes about their forthcoming voyage. The two co-pilots, Esquilla and Flack, tried their best, but

their gaiety was too interspersed with sudden melancholy moods. Esquilla, a small dark Cuban with an ingratiating smile, spoke of his wife, Marie. Flack, a bachelor, spoke of many women, but without flippancy. Lt. Daniel Fisher, the radioman and astronomer, stared blankly through his thick-lensed glasses, and puckered his broad, high forehead as if occupied with secret thoughts. The sergeant, Will Bart, was the glummiest of them all. It was he who finally broke up the party, by grumbling an excuse and going off to bed.

At 0900 the following morning, the crew of the starship *Fermi* gathered under a cold, gray sky. Two hours later, the countdown sounded in the brassy loudspeakers that rimmed the spaceport, and the great ship spit fire and assailed the leaden clouds.

They made landfall three months later.

The briefing sessions had been complete. For weeks, the crew of the *Fermi* had been pre-conditioned to existence on World A15. So thorough, so accurate was their education, that the actual arrival seemed like nothing more than an extension of their training period. Yet not more

than an hour after the starship grew quiet in the swirling gray dust of the alien terrain, they realized that all the blackboard statistics had failed to convey the eerie mood of the small, slate-gray world, with its odd, ball-like patches of murky green vegetation, with its insidious warm winds that brought drowsiness at their touch, with its utter silence and incredibly clear sky.

Captain Joel Saylor let them alone for their first twelve hours on the planet, before giving them any commands that would require them to work. It was wisdom on his part. In the two months of the voyage, he had learned that there was no cement to his crew. They weren't a team: they were just five men of military background and space experience. They worked together, because they had to, but they were individuals first. And, as individuals, he felt that they hadn't accepted his authority yet.

It would take time, Joel thought to himself. And time was just what they had.

The next morning, the work began.

It was satisfying work; each man well-trained in his job, busy with familiar, rewarding tasks. The problems

they would face weren't work problems; Joel knew that. The problems would come when the initial labors were done, when the radio transmitter was in full operation, when living quarters had been constructed, when they had established a livable colony on World A15, and had settled down into the monotonous routine that would vary only little in the next three years.

He was right. Within two months, the major portion of their work had been completed, and there was restlessness among the men. It was then that Joel told them:

"Men, our next assignment should be interesting. Starting tomorrow, we're going to hunt up our friend Corsini."

They reacted pleasantly; the idea of a chase intrigued them.

"We'll make up a searching party that will fly the copter in a circle covering a hundred mile radius. If we don't spot him the first time, we'll make temporary camp at the perimeter of that circle, and cover another hundred miles the next day. We'll keep doing this until we have our man." He rubbed his jaw. "Now we can't all go, of course. Two men will be needed at the ship; one of them to keep the trans-

mitter in operation. So I guess that includes you out, Lt. Fisher."

The radioman's youthful face didn't seem disturbed.

"Doesn't matter to me, sir. Just as soon stay with my equipment."

"Good. Then that leaves only one other man to eliminate. We'll determine that by a drawing."

He marked five strips of paper and folded them into his helmet. Then he passed the hat among them.

"The man with the X doesn't go," Joel said.

"I got it," Palmer said cheerfully, tossing away the wadded paper. "And I guess you got me, genius."

Fisher blushed. "Glad to have you."

"We'll take off at daybreak. Sergeant Bart, you get the copter ready, and load it with enough supplies to sustain us for a four-day expedition."

"Yes, sir."

"And I want every man in full field pack, including extra ammo. This Corsini may be harmless, but we won't take any chances."

"Maybe that's the idea," Bart said, his lip curling. "Maybe we ought to just put this loony out of his misery—"

Joel's face hardened. "We want Corsini alive, Sergeant.

That goes for all of you. If he's found, we bring him back as a guest, and treat him that way until the supply ship comes to take him to Earth. Any man who harms him gets court-martialled."

Their expressions went sullen. Joel wanted to smile and soften his words, keep things friendly. Then he decided to do nothing.

They found the magician not more than forty miles from the landing site. He was a stooped, ragged figure, darting over the gray surface of the planet like a winged insect, casting a long shadow in the light of the Antara sun. As their copter dropped closer to the ground, they saw that his "wings" were the tattered remnants of an ancient dress suit.

"He's afraid of us," Palmer shouted, above the sound of the engine. "Look at him running—"

"How the hell does he *live* out here?" Flack said. "He couldn't be eating that muddy green stuff, could he? It looks about as edible as old dollar bills."

"It's edible," Palmer smiled. "Remember what Colonel Deegan said? It tastes like boiled lettuce, only not as good."

"He looks fat enough," Esquila grunted. "It must be nourishing, anyway."

Joel pushed the copter fifty yards in front of the fleeing figure below; then he began to descend. The strange man beneath them halted, looked about wildly, and then began to retreat in the other direction. "He won't get far," Joel said, and brought the aircraft gently to the gray terrain.

They clambered out hurriedly and ran after the magician, with the Captain in the lead. His long legs and youthful wind kept him well in front of the others, until a sudden suspicion made him wheel about. He saw the sergeant drop to one knee and unstrap his rifle, ready to take aim at the galloping figure.

"No!" Joel shouted. "Put that rifle down!"

"Only gonna scare him, Captain—"

"I said put it down!"

Then there was a break: a good one for the crew, a bad one for Corsini, the Great. His clumsy body stumbled over a rock, and he crashed heavily to the ground. They heard his "oof!" of shock as he fell, and came running to surround him.

"Easy, easy," Joel cautioned. "Don't frighten him."

Corsini looked up at them like a wounded, terrified animal. He was a short, fat man with a leonine head haloed by wild, stringy black hair. His chins quivered as he saw the uniformed, armed men who ringed him, and his eyes were round with fright.

"It's all right, Mr. Corsini," Joel said, bending to him. The magician made a noise in his throat and pushed his hand away. "We haven't come to hurt you. We—we're delegates from Earth. We came to invite you to pay us a visit."

Palmer chuckled, and the Sergeant snorted.

Again the magician made throat sounds, and Joel suddenly realized what they were. After so many years of solitude, Corsini must have done little talking, even to himself. His vocal chords were rusted with disuse; the words wouldn't emerge.

When they did, they were hoarse, and almost unintelligible.

"What—what do you want? Leave me alone—"

"We mean you no harm, sir, believe me. The Earth government has sent us here, to ask if you would come to Washington as an official guest. Our starship is only some forty miles from here; you can stay at our camp until

the next ship arrives from Earth."

"No!" the man bellowed. "I won't go!"

"But Mr. Corsini—"

"I said no! This is my home! My kingdom! You can't make me leave it. I won't go with you!"

Joel clucked his tongue. "I'm afraid you'll *have* to, Mr. Corsini. You see, we have our orders. They'll be very disappointed in Washington if you don't show up—"

"You can't make me!" Corsini shrieked, rolling on the ground like a child in a tantrum. "You have no right here! You're trespassers. Trespassers!"

"Poor bum," Esquilla muttered.

"A nut," the sergeant growled. "Nothing but a nut."

"This is my planet! My world! You can't drive me off. You're the ones who have to leave. You're the ones!"

"But we're not leaving," Joel said gently. "You may as well get used to that idea, Mr. Corsini. We have food and drink at the ship, real food and drink, from Earth. I'll bet it's a long time since you tasted Earth food. Come with us, Mr. Corsini. You won't regret it." He put his

hand on the man's elbow, and helped him to his feet.

They saw the tears rolling down Corsini's round cheeks.

"Trespasser," he whispered. "Invaders . . ."

They thought he had succumbed. But then the magician flung himself at the Captain like a giant bird, his coattails flying behind him, his hands like claws closing around Joel's windpipe. Joel fought, but the magician's arms held astonishing strength; then Sergeant Bart's rifle crashed on the thick mane of black hair, and Corsini groaned and sank to the ground.

"You fool!" Joel said harshly. "You may have killed him—"

"He was killing you, wasn't he?"

Joel bent over him. "Still alive, thank God. Palmer, Esquilla—help me get him into the copter. We'll take him to the ship and make him a prisoner, if that's how he wants it."

They bore the unconscious body to the waiting copter, and in the rapidly descending night that was falling on World A15, flew their captive back to the shipsite.

Captain Joel Saylor looked in on his captive in the morn-

ing. He was sitting inside the metal cage that had once housed construction equipment, its entrance sealed by a complex electronic lock. Corsini's head was bowed, and he looked as if his struggling days were done.

"Mr. Corsini."

The magician looked up slowly.

"Look, Mr. Corsini, I know how you feel about our coming here, but we're under military orders. We don't want to hurt you; all we want to do is see to your well-being. Surely you can't like the life on this world—"

"Why shouldn't I?" he whispered hoarsely. "It's my kingdom, isn't it? Shouldn't a king like his kingdom?"

"But the loneliness, and the food, and—" Joel scratched his head. "You didn't come here on purpose, did you?"

"No. No," Corsini said, his eyes distant. *"They put me here, those people on the ship. I was a stowaway; I thought I might make my fortune in space. They laughed at me, called me crazy, and then—when they couldn't find the precious metals they sought—called me a Jonah. They landed here and left me behind. But they didn't know it would become my kingdom, and that I would rule all . . ."*

His eyes came back to focus on the present. They narrowed, and became shrewd and ugly.

"You'd better let me free, Captain," he said, almost confidently. "It would be better for all of you, if you did."

"I'm sorry, Mr. Corsini."

"You'll regret it, Captain, believe me. I've learned to do things here, things so horrible you couldn't conceive of them. Let me go now, and leave my world, or—"

Joel stopped him. "Excuse me, Mr. Corsini; I have business at the ship."

"You better listen!" the magician said, hurtling himself at the door of his prison. "You better listen, Captain! If you don't leave, I'll bring plagues on you! Like Moses did to Egypt, I'll bring plagues!" He laughed excitedly at the idea. "Yes, like Moses! I'll torment you as you've never known torment before. You'll be sorry you ever saw my name—" His laugh increased in volume, rising to a weird crescendo.

"I'm sorry," Joel said pitifully, and returned to the ship.

Corsini, the Great, didn't cease his wild threats for the rest of that day. His shouted curses, his intermittent sobs and maniacal laughter, even

his sudden silences, began to fray the crew's nerves as they went about their duties. It was harder than ever for Joel to keep them a working team, to keep them interested in the project at hand.

But the night was worse, and at one point, Sergeant Bart threw aside the covers of his bunk and said:

"Doesn't that loony ever sleep? He's driving me crazy!"

Palmer drawled: "How about it, Captain? Maybe we should give our friend a knockout pill. We'll never get any rest this way."

Joel frowned. "We'll have to do something, all right. Maybe that's the best way to handle him."

"He won't eat our food," Palmer said, "but he doesn't refuse our whisky. How about giving him a slug, with a few drops of bye-bye liquid. I can take it out to him now."

"All right," Joel said. "If that's the only way."

A few minutes later, the navigator left the ship. They waited and listened, and were rewarded with silence from their prisoner. Joel sighed, and returned his head to the pillow.

But ten minutes passed, and Palmer didn't come back.

"What do you think, sir?"

Sergeant Bart said. "Want me to investigate?"

"We'll both go."

Joel took a rifle, and preceded the Sergeant out of the ship and down the ladder. They walked across the starlit ground towards the prison.

Lt. Palmer was lying in front of the open door, his blood dark on the ground. The prison was empty.

"He got away!" the Sergeant blinked. "I don't see how he could have—he couldn't have forced the Lieutenant to open that trick lock—"

"But he did," Joel said, dropping to his knee. "Thank God Palmer's okay; just a rock wound on his forehead." He picked up the jagged stone by the injured man's side.

Palmer began to stir; then his eyes opened.

"Captain . . ."

"Easy, Palmer. What happened here? How did Corsini get away?"

"What?" The officer tried to rise, but his throbbing head must have changed his mind. He touched it, and drew away his hand, puzzled at the feel of his own blood. "How did this happen? What did he do to me?"

"You mean you don't know?"

"I don't know anything," the lieutenant groaned. "All I

remember is handing him the whisky — and then seeing you."

Sergeant Bart cursed all madmen.

The Captain stood up and looked towards the dark horizon, thoughtfully.

"Then we have to do it all over again," he said. "We'll track the magician tomorrow. And hold him, this time."

It was Esquilla who made the discovery.

He was the first one up in the morning. Esquilla's family were farmers in Cuba; they woke up roosters. Esquilla, even in the alien dawn filtering through the ship's view-plate, stirred restlessly on his bunk at four-thirty, shiptime, and then finally gave up the fight and rose. He moved soundlessly between the bunks of the sleeping crew, and feeling a dryness in his throat, went to the water tank. He filled a cup, and brought it to his mouth.

His strangled shriek awoke the others. They leaped from their beds, ready to do battle with whatever other-world horror had entered the ship. They raced to him.

All they saw was Lt. Esquilla, clutching his throat and mumbling in another language, while he stared at the

fallen cup with its spilled contents.

"What is it? What's up, Carlos?" Captain Saylor grabbed his shoulders. "Somebody get the lights on—"

Glare filled the cabin.

"For the love of God," Palmer said. "What is that stuff?"

Gary Flack bent over and touched it with his fingers, then brought his soiled hand to his nose.

"It looks like . . . blood . . ."

Esquilla found his voice. "In the drinking tank. That's where it came from. I came here in the dark and poured a cup, and it tasted hot and sticky . . ."

"It can't be," the Sergeant said. "You must be fooling us . . ."

"Try it yourself!" Esquilla said furiously.

Sergeant Bart shrugged, and took a cup from the rack. He pushed the button as the others watched. They didn't need his confirmation; they all saw the deep red stuff trickle slowly, thickly out of the tap.

"Ugh," Palmer said, wheeling about and going pale. "I feel like heaving . . ."

"It can't be blood!" Fisher said. "It must be some kind of discoloration, or contamination. Maybe some kind of algae got into the tank."

"That sealed tank?" Gary Flack said. "You're not as smart as you look, genius. Nothing could get into that tank without a cobalt bomb explosion."

"Let's take it easy," Joel said, trying to keep command. "No use panicking; we're bound to run into some strange stuff sooner or later. This isn't Earth."

"I tell you it's blood," Esquilla said. "Human blood. It's not contamination."

"I can soon find out," Fisher volunteered, searching for equipment on the shelf over his bunk. "Give me ten minutes, and I'll run an analysis. It might still be good for drinking—"

"Not me!" Palmer curled his lip. "I wouldn't drink that stuff if my tongue turned black."

"Go ahead," the Captain ordered. "Make your tests, Fisher."

The radioman did, hunching over the microscope with a smear of the red liquid on a slide beneath the lens. The crew of the *Fermi* waited expectantly for his answer.

He looked up, and with almost scholarly detachment, said:

"Yes, it's blood, all right. Human blood, Type O."

There was silence in the cabin, until Gary Flack said:

"Don't you get it? Don't you see the gimmick? It's *him*."

"Who?"

"What's his name, Corsini. The crazy magician. He must have sneaked in here after his escape and pulled this stunt. It's his idea of a joke—"

They reacted with mixed emotions to Flack's explanation. The Sergeant swore and looked murderous. Fisher and Palmer looked unconvinced. Esquilla was beyond reaction; his dark eyes stared at the puddle of crimson on the shiny steel floor.

Only Captain Joel Saylor listened to the co-pilot's words, and shook his head in instantaneous understanding.

I'll bring plagues on you... like Moses brought the Pharaoh, I'll bring plagues...

He alone had heard the magician's threat and promise. Only Joel knew, and only Joel remembered that the first plague visited upon Egypt by Moses and a revengeful Jehovah was the plague of blood...

He masked his face, and said, curtly:

"Let's be sensible. There was no way Corsini could have gotten into that tank. Until we have a better explanation, we'll have to accept the idea

of contamination. And the next thing we have to do is locate a new source of water."

"The supply ship," Palmer said. "It won't be here for another couple of months. We'll die if we don't find one—"

"That's right. So we have to dig, and dig until we're exhausted."

"But how do we know there are underground wells?"

"It rains on A15, doesn't it? And there's vegetation. That means there's water somewhere, and we've got to get to it. It's that or die, so we can take our choice."

A silence.

"We'll dig," Flack said.

"And pray for rain," Palmer added, a small light of good humor returning to his face.

There weren't any prayers spoken aloud among the crew of the *Fermi* as they began their drilling operations. But five hours later, their mouths dry with the slate-gray dust of the planet, a gentle rain came out of the clouds. Whooping and shouting, they brought out every available container to catch the falling moisture; when the rain stopped six hours later, they had enough drinkable water to last them for weeks.

They waited until the following day to renew their search for the escaped magician. For twelve hours, the copter scanned a two-hundred mile vicinity, searching for signs of Corsini's plump figure. The expedition wasn't successful; towards nightfall, the Captain said:

"We'll go down and make temporary camp here. Then we'll begin fresh in the morning."

They landed, and began to unload their supplies.

Nobody saw Palmer get separated from the others; he had wandered off to examine a grove of spongy leafs, to sample the weird botanical specimens of A15. They were only aware of it when they heard his terrified cry.

They came on the run in the direction of the sound, and when they saw the monstrous green thing enveloping the Lieutenant, they stopped in horror and shock, not knowing what to do next. At first, no one recognized the ghastly form of the thing that was pinning Palmer to the gray earth; then Esquilla shouted:

"Dios! a *frog*!"

The familiar word broke the almost superstitious spell they were under. Joel unstrapped his rifle and fired over the head of the beast; it raised its

ugly horned body and its great maw fell open. The grotesquely enlarged frog bellowed and grunted at them in anger, and under its spread-eagled feet, Lieutenant Palmer wriggled free and broke into a staggering run.

Joel fired again, this time aiming to hurt the thing that was rearing to plunge at them. It spun under the bullet's impact, and gave a croak of defiance. Then it crouched and tried to spring, but the other rifles in the search party rained bullets at its head and soft underbelly. It shrieked in pain and fury, and sprawled forward in death.

They walked towards it, all except Palmer.

"A frog," Esquilla muttered. "A giant frog . . . millions of miles from Earth . . ." He crossed himself.

Gary Flack said: "I thought Deegan told us there wasn't any animal life on A15?"

"He did," Joel answered. "But I guess he was wrong. All right, let's settle down and get some sleep. We've got a long flying day tomorrow . . ."

They returned to the copter, and readied their sleeping bags for the night.

The droning noise began just when sleep was heaviest upon them. Joel heard it first,

and opened its eyes to locate the source. It was dark, too dark for Planet A15, and he wondered what had happened to dim the lights of the diamond-bright stars that should have been shining overhead.

"What is it?" Flack whispered to him.

"I don't know. Something—something's happened to the stars."

"The stars?"

Flack looked up, and murmured at the blackness of the heavens. The droning sound intensified, and then they knew that the stars were still there, but their brightness was concealed behind a thick blanket of flying insects!

"Look out!" Flack yelled, as the droning became a roar, and the buzzing creatures swarmed over the sleeping figures on the ground. The others shrieked and leaped to their feet, batting at the insects, fighting to keep from smothering beneath their countless wings.

"The copter! Back to the copter!" Joel shouted, flapping his sleeping bag at the attackers. "We'll be eaten alive—"

Stumbling, gasping, filled with panic, the four men from the starship made their way to the copter door, and battled the angry black insects that

were blotting out the white form of the aircraft. Joel threw himself at the controls and started the whirling blades; it cut a wide swath through the flying creatures, allowing them time enough to climb aboard. They shot upwards into the starless sky, slapping at the bugs remaining in the cabin, sobbing as they felt their painful bites and saw the red welts on their flesh.

At last they were free of them, and heading back for the safety of the starship. The stars appeared once more, and they knew the danger was past.

"What were they?" Palmer said. "Never saw anything like that—"

"Gnats or something," Flack said, looking at his reddened arms. "Worst swarm of gnats I ever saw. What do you think, Captain? What were they?"

Joel didn't say what his thoughts were, for they were thoughts of Corsini, the Great, and his promise.

What would be next?

They found out when the copter landed. Fisher, the radioman, came running towards them, his face contorted.

"What's wrong?" Joel said,

climbing out to meet him. "What happened here?"

"Flies!" Fisher said explosively.

"What?"

"They were gnats," Palmer drawled. "We ran into them ourselves."

"No, flies!" Fisher insisted, scanning their faces anxiously. "Biggest damn flies you ever saw—maybe a foot long! They attacked the ship—we had to take cover—"

"Where's the Sergeant?"

"In the ship. I—I think he passed out. He's okay, just in shock; I can't blame him—the place was covered—"

They raced towards the ladder of the *Fermi*. Sergeant Bart was on his bunk, beneath a blanket, looking like a man recovering from a binge. Joel examined him swiftly, and confirmed Fisher's diagnosis.

"What did they do? Let's hear the story—"

"The food," Fisher said hoarsely.

"What?"

"They headed for the food supply. I don't know how they managed to get into the containers, but they did. They swarmed all over everything; all the food's rotten and maggoty now; we won't be able to touch it..."

"No food?" Palmer sat heavily on a bunk. "That real-

ly caps it! What do we do without food?"

"We'll eat grass if we have to," Joel said firmly. "We know the stuff is edible. We'll eat it until the ship comes."

They had their first sample later that day. Deegan had understated the effect of the spongy, edible leaf on their taste buds. It tasted like boiled lettuce, all right, but there were subtler flavors in it, too, and so revolting that three of the six-man crew were sick within thirty seconds of their first mouthful.

Fisher radioed Earth that night, and told them their situation. They made no promises of expediting the arrival of the supply ship.

"All right," Joel told them. "If it gets too unbearable, then we'll do the only sensible thing. We'll blast off in the *Fermi* and meet the supply ship half-way."

But the next day, co-pilot Gary Flack had another disastrous announcement.

"We won't be able to use the ship, Captain. Not for quite a while."

"What? Why not?"

"I've just made an inspection of the engines. Something's gotten into them, clogged the rocket chambers. Some kind of tough barnacles.

The guts of the *Fermi* are lousy with 'em. It'll take us a month to clean her up."

Joel sighed. "Then let's start cleaning."

He walked away from his co-pilot, thinking about the curse which had fallen upon the expedition.

"Blood," he thought. "Frogs, gnats, flies . . . and now a mur-rain upon the ship . . ."

He reached down and rubbed the calf of his right leg. It responded painfully to his touch. He didn't know what caused it until later that night, preparing for bed, when the affliction was widespread among the crew.

"Boils!" Sergeant Bart cursed. "I'm covered with 'em! I can't sit or stand—"

"Oh, God!" Esquilla said angrily, shaking his fist at the sky. "What are you doing to us?"

Lt. Fisher, holding his hand to a fiery eruption over his left eye, stared thoughtfully out of the ship's viewplate.

"Don't you see what's happening? Don't you recognize it?"

Joel went icy. "What do you mean?"

"The boils. The sixth plague of Egypt. And all the other things that have been happening to us . . ."

"You're crazy," Palmer said,

lying on his bunk and squirming with discomfort. "It's this lousy planet; something in the atmosphere."

The Captain stood up and went to the hatchway.

"Where are you going, Captain?"

"I'm taking the copter out, alone. Maybe our magician friend will show up if he knows I'm alone. Maybe I can talk to him . . ."

Palmer struggled to sit up. "You think Corsini's behind this?"

"I don't know. But I'll try and find out."

He went down the ladder, and towards the waiting copter.

Two hours later, he saw the fat figure of Corsini the Great waving his short, stumpy arms at the aircraft.

Joel brought the copter to the ground, and stepped out, unencumbered by weapons.

Corsini waited impassively as the Captain strode towards him, his arms folded across the soiled jacket of his ancient dress suit. When Joel was within five yards, he said:

"Kneel!"

Joel stopped, and his mouth tightened.

"Don't be stupid, Corsini. I've come to talk to you."

"Kneel," the magician said.

"You're in the presence of a king, Captain. Custom demands it."

Grumbling, Joel dropped to his knees.

"Now," Corsini gloated. "What is it you wish?"

"I want to know something. These things that have been happening to us. Are you responsible?"

"Of course. I have been making good my promise, Captain. As Moses freed the Israelites from the chains of Egypt, I will free my planet from the chains of Earth. I will drive you forth with terrible plagues . . ."

"But how?" Joel said. "How do you do it?"

Corsini laughed.

"The first rule of magicians, Captain—reveal no secrets to the laymen. I have my methods, and you have not yet seen the full scope of my powers. Have you come to tell me that you are leaving, that you will leave me to my world?"

Joel got to his feet.

"No," he said quietly. "I came to warn you."

"Kneel!" the magician shouted.

"No, Corsini. No more kneeling. I came to tell you that whatever tricks you're playing on us must stop at once. If they don't, we'll ignore the command to bring

you back alive to Earth. We'll kill you."

The magician rubbed his lower chin, and smiled.

"Simple as that, Captain? I doubt it. My bag of tricks hasn't been fully opened, you know. Beware of the seventh plague, Captain."

"It's my final warning, Corsini. My next order will be to shoot you on sight."

"Goodbye, Captain," the magician said, and turned away.

Joel went back to the copter. He pretended to start the engine, and then reached hurriedly for the rifle on the seat. But when he looked back at the spot where the conference had taken place, Corsini, the Great, was gone.

He came back to the ship, to find the crew of the *Fermi* lying unconscious on the ground.

Joel didn't breathe normally until he had examined the fallen men one by one, and determined that all were alive.

Slowly, the four officers and Sergeant Bart awakened, looking about them in bewilderment. They were dazed, stupefied by what had happened, but beyond their ragged mental states, no damage had been done.

"Stones," Palmer told the Captain. "Enormous boulders.

God knows where they came from. They dropped right out of the sky, knocked us down . . ." He looked about him, at the bare flat terrain, his eyes puzzled.

"Nothing here," Joel said. "No stones, Lieutenant."

"They *were* stones," Fisher said tightly. "Hailstones, Captain. The seventh plague of Egypt—"

"I say let's get out of here," Flack said casually. "Finish up the scraping job and get out. A few more days like this, and we'll be washed up anyway."

"We're not leaving," Joel said. "We've got an assignment and we're carrying it out."

"The seventh plague, Captain," Fisher said insistently. "And the eighth—"

"I know," Joel said curtly. "So now we know what to look for. The next problem will be locusts . . ."

"Locusts?" Flack said.

"If Corsini sticks to the script, that's what we can expect. There'll probably be a swarm of them, an all-out attack. But we're prepared this time; we'll make plans to get inside the ship at the first sign of trouble. We'll use heat guns to blast them; if they get too troublesome, we'll try and get the *Fermi* off the ground and

burn them with our rocket fire. Understand?"

"But Captain—"

"Never mind the questions!" Joel said angrily. "Just keep your eyes peeled. All we can do is watch and wait."

They waited.

Four hours later, the locusts came.

But the men of the starship *Fermi*, with heat guns poised, with minds prepared for battle, didn't fire a shot.

They weren't ordinary locusts. They were a hundred times larger, and greener, and uglier; their wing spread was incredible; the noise they made was deafening.

But the real horror was in the faces of the unholy creatures that launched their attack against the starship. Imbedded in each monstrous head was the face of a woman—a different woman.

"Oh, God, God!" Esquilla screamed, dropping his weapon with a clatter. "It's Marie! Marie!"

Gary Flack stared with incredulous eyes. "Sally," he muttered, a low giggle starting in his throat. "It's Sally; I can recognize her . . ."

"Dorothy! Oh my Lord, Dorothy!" Fisher shouted, leaping for the hatchway.

"I've got to go out there—got to reach her—"

Joel dived for the radio-man's slight figure, and brought it crashing into the bulkhead of the ship. Fisher struggled violently, but Joel was stronger. He pinned him to the bunk, and slapped the thin cheeks hard. "Easy, easy!" he panted. "It's another rotten trick, only a trick . . ."

Fisher began to sob, and the Captain returned to the view-plate, unable to turn his fascinated gaze from the things thudding against the ship.

Then he saw Helen's face. It was smiling, sweetly, in the angelic, madonna-like way Helen had, the way she had smiled at him on their last day together in Roanoke. Her violet eyes were misty, and when they met his, the world called A15 spun dizzily in Joel's eyes, and he felt the dark of unconsciousness cover him.

When he awoke, the darkness was still there.

"Palmer," he said. "Flack!"

No answer.

"Esquilla! Fisher! Sergeant Bart!"

"Here," a voice whispered. "Over here . . ."

He felt his way along the edge of the bunk until his fingers touched another hand.

"Who is it?"

"Me, Sergeant Bart. The others are outside, wandering around. I told 'em not to, Captain, honest I did. I told 'em it was best to stay in the ship, so we don't get lost or separated . . ."

"What's happening? I can't see, Sergeant!"

"None of us can, Captain. It happened after the locusts. Everything went dark, all over the planet. We tried to light flares, but we couldn't see a thing. It's us, Captain." His voice neared the edge of hysteria. "We're blind. He's made us blind!"

"Take it easy," Joel said unsteadily. "It's only another trick. It'll pass, Sergeant, like all the rest."

"When, Captain? When?"
"I don't know!"

Joel put his hands to his face, rubbing his fists violently into his blinded eyes.

"When, Captain?" the Sergeant said hollowly, his voice yearning.

"Shut up!" Joel screamed. He got up and staggered against the wall, guiding himself towards the hatchway.

"Don't go, Captain. Don't go out there—"

But Joel went, down the ladder clumsily, falling at its base. He got to his feet, swaying, and shouted:

"Corsini!"

His voice echoed faintly, even over the flat plains of World A15.

"Corsini, where are you?"

He heard a shuffling sound beside him. He whirled, and the low voice of the magician came to his ear.

"You want me, Captain?"

Joel clutched at air. "Where are you, damn you? Where the hell are you?"

Corsini sniggered. "It's no use, Captain. I can see you, and you can't see me. Not a fair fight, Captain."

"You've got to stop this, Corsini. You've got to give us back our sight!"

"Gladly, Captain. I mean you no harm. But there are certain conditions—"

"We have orders! This isn't our idea!"

"Nevertheless, Captain. If you wish to see again, you must make me a promise. Or else the plague of darkness will remain with you and your men forever . . ."

Joel tried to think, tried to reason, but no answer came to his mind except surrender.

"All right," he said wearily. "Whatever you want, Corsini."

"I want you to leave. Leave this world and never return. Will you promise that, Captain?"

"Yes!"

"A solemn promise, Captain."

"You have my word," Joel groaned.

"Then you will see again," the magician said.

He heard Corsini laugh, and then heard nothing more.

A few moments later, the light returned to the eyes of the captain and his men. But their restored vision didn't include sight of Corsini, the Great.

"How did you do it, Captain?" Flack said. "What did you tell him?"

"I—I said we would leave. I gave him my promise."

"And are we?"

"No," Joel said stubbornly. "Not unless Earth headquarters says we can. I'll have Fisher radio them now, and tell them what's happened. If they say go, we go. If they order us to stay—"

"But what if he comes back? What if Corsini—

"It doesn't matter," Joel Saylor said, his shoulders slumping. Then he walked away, not wanting to see the look in the eyes of his men.

Within three hours, the captain called a council of war.

"I have something important to say. Lt. Fisher has radioed Earth, and their or-

ders are just what I expected them to be. We're to hold our ground, and do what we can to end the menace that Corsini represents. We don't have to worry about previous orders; we can deal with him as we see fit."

Esquilla snorted. "Bravo. So we can kill our phantom, if we can catch him."

"All right, Lieutenant. So he's got us whipped right now. But that doesn't mean we have to give up."

There was a pause. Then Palmer said:

"What about the next plague, Captain?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. If Corsini continues to run true to form, then we all know what his next trick will be. In his madness, he's following the Book of Exodus, and the tenth plague is next on the program. The death of the firstborn—"

"Firstborn?" the sergeant growled. "I ain't got no kids—"

"None of us have," Joel said. "I mean the death of the firstborn among ourselves."

He studied their faces in turn. Esquilla was staring at the floor. Flack and Palmer were somber. Fisher's eyes were hooded. Only the sergeant's face showed anything; it may have been relief.

"I know what you're thinking," Joel said. "If the next plague comes, it means you won't have a captain for this crew. So the first order of business is to elect a new leader, just in case." He turned to Gary Flack. "It's up to you, Lieutenant, in case anything happens."

Fisher looked ready to cry. "You don't really think it will, Captain?"

"No," Joel smiled. "I don't."

"Why not?" Bart grunted. "That crazy Corsini's made good on all the other plagues. Why not this one?"

"Because all the other plagues were imaginary, that's why. The water wasn't blood—it was water, good drinking water—"

"But I tested it," Fisher said, "analyzed it."

"Even your analysis was imaginary, Lieutenant. You saw what Corsini wanted you to see. That frog was a phantom, too, and so were the gnats, and the flies, and the barnacles on our ship. So were the boils, and the hailstones—"

"But they knocked us out. How did that happen?"

"Then where were the stones? And how was it that nobody was hurt, bruised, even scratched? They might

have been cotton wadding for all the tangible damage they inflicted. And the darkness, the blindness — where else is sight but in the mind? Don't you see? Corsini was a hypnotist, a master hypnotist. These fourteen years alone have given him greater hypnotic power than anyone could dream possible. He's got us all under some kind of spell—but he can't really *hurt* us. He could drive us crazy, that's for sure, but he can't inflict actual physical harm. And that's why I'm not worried about the tenth plague."

Flack whistled softly.

"I'm glad you're not worried, Captain. Cause if *I* were the oldest . . ."

"But you're not," Joel said stiffly. "I am. And if Corsini thinks he can kill me—let him try."

They all slept badly that night. Yet sleep, the peculiar heavy sleep that the heavy night air of A15 encouraged, finally came.

In the morning, Joel woke first.

He looked at the sleeping figures of his men, and said a grateful prayer to God for sparing him in the night, for making his prediction come true for at least a few more hours.

One by one, the crew members awakened. Esquilla got up first, grinning when he saw the captain. Then Palmer and Flack awoke, stretching and yawning. Fisher was next.

Yet Sergeant Bart remained in his bunk.

"Hey, Sarge," Palmer said cheerfully. "Rise and shine."

But Bart remained motionless.

"Hey, Willie. Let's get out of that sack, fella."

When he didn't respond, Palmer touched the sergeant's shoulder. Then, in a sudden surge of anxiety, he turned him on the bed.

They looked at his open, staring eyes.

"Oh, God," Palmer whispered.

"He's dead. Bart's dead!"

"He got the wrong one," Flack said. "He got the wrong man . . ."

Fisher came to their side.

"No. No, he didn't."

They turned to him.

"Bart was the *oldest*," he said mournfully. "I was the only one who knew; he got drunk the night of the party, and told me about it. He's been lying about his age for years; he didn't want to wash out of space service. He was thirty-one; almost too old for space training . . ." Tears gleamed behind Fisher's heavy glasses.

Joel bent over the body.

"Wait a minute," he said.

"What is it, Captain?"

"This wasn't any plague. This wasn't hypnotic—"

"I don't get you," Flack said.

"Look!" Joel pointed. "Those marks on his throat. There wasn't any magic in what Corsini did. He might have put us to sleep, so we couldn't hear what was happening. But those are finger-marks on Bart's neck. Corsini strangled him!"

They all saw them clearly now: the red imprints on the white flesh of the Sergeant.

"That rotten coward!" Palmer said.

"We'll get him," Flack swore. "We've got to get him—"

"We'll get him all right," Joel said grimly. "We'll get him with treachery. Flack—Esquilla—prepare the *Fermi* for takeoff."

"What?"

"You heard me. I want to leave A15 within the hour. I want to blast off this Godforsaken planet as soon as we can—"

"But our orders—"

"Don't worry," Joel went to the viewplate. "We're not going for long, Lieutenant. Only long enough to make that madman think we've gone.

Then we're coming back, and getting rid of him once and for all."

They watched him uncertainly.

"Get going!" Joel shouted.

They went into action, a smooth-working team.

In less than an hour, the rockets of the *Fermi* were rumbling, and the fire started in the chambers. A few moments later, the huge starship lifted itself from the seared ground, and rose into the heavens, dividing the gray clouds as Moses had divided the sea . . .

"We'll make a shallow orbit around the planet," Joel instructed. "Then we'll head straight back for our original landing position. Unless I miss my guess, our magician friend will be in the vicinity, celebrating his victory. He'll have a surprise coming."

Two hours later, the starship was turning, and its nose cut through the thin upper atmosphere of World A15. The gray terrain loomed up once again in the viewplate as they made the slow descent.

They were within a thousand feet of the planet when Flack shouted:

"Look! There he is!"

In the telescopic sight, they saw the figure of Corsini, the

Great, his arms raised, his hands balled into fists, a picture of wrath.

"Now," Captain Saylor said grimly.

The starship veered and descended again, its landing rockets roaring full blast, the scorching fire burning the gray earth into white, dusty clouds. In the sighting mechanism, they saw the awkward figure of the magician fleeing from the menace of the ship's fiery rockets, but his short legs couldn't outrun them.

They averted their eyes when they saw Corsini stumble and fall, and were grateful when the roar of the rockets hid the shriek of horror that came from his throat as the flames engulfed him.

Then there was nothing more than a smudge of ashes beneath the ship, ashes that were swirled away by the winds of planet A15 . . .

Colonel Deegan stood up as Captain Joel Saylor entered his office. He answered his salute with a perfunctory wave of his hand, and asked the captain to sit.

Then he examined the face which Joel Saylor had brought back from three years in space. It was still a young face, but the eyes were different, and there were more lines

permanently engraved about the mouth.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Deegan said quietly.

"Yes. Why not?"

"I know how you must feel. I told you my own experience, Captain, the first day we met. But now I want to hear yours."

Joel studied his hands. They were trembling, so he locked them in his lap.

"I—I don't know how it really happened. With the magician dead, we returned to our routine chores. We operated our transmitter, and took astronomical data, and kept the space traffic, such as it was, flowing throughout the Antara system. We sat around and talked, and watched our movies, and wrote letters, and tried to get to know each other. But when we found the work wasn't enough, that the talk wasn't satisfying, that the movies weren't entertaining. We got to know each other, all right, and the more we knew, the more we hated each other's faults, and even virtues. We began to quarrel. We began to fight. Finally, we began to kill . . ."

"Esquila . . ."

"I don't think Palmer meant to kill him. But when he did, in the heat of their

(Continued on page 121)

THE TROONS OF SPACE

THE MOON

A. D. 2044

By JOHN WYNDHAM

ILLUSTRATOR FINLAY

*From the moon, Mike Troon watched Earth
destroy itself—and did nothing. His job was
to save mankind for the stars.*

THERE was a double knock on the alloy door. The Station-Commander, standing with his back to the room, looking out of the window, appeared for the moment not to hear it. Then he turned, just as the knock was repeated.

"Come in," he said, in a flat, unwelcoming tone.

The woman who entered was tall, well-built, and age about thirty. Her good looks were a trifle austere, but softened slightly by the curls of her short, light-brown hair. Her most striking feature was her soft, blue-grey eyes; they were beautiful, and intelligent, too.

"Good morning, Commander," she said, in a brisk, formal voice.

He waited until the door had latched, then:

"You'll probably be ostracized," he told her.

She shook her head slightly. "My official duty," she said. "Doctors are different. Privileged in some ways, on account of being not quite human in others."

He watched her come further into the room, wondering, as he had before, whether she had originally joined the service because its silky uniform matched her eyes, for she could certainly have ad-



Troon contemplated the future in a world ruined by war.

vanced more quickly elsewhere. Anyway, the uniform certainly suited her elegant slenderness.

"Am I not invited to sit?" she inquired.

"By all means you are, if you care to. I thought you might prefer not," he told her.

She approached a chair with the half-floating step that had become second-nature, and let herself sink gently on to it. Without removing her gaze from his face, she pulled out a cigarette-case.

"Sorry," he said, and held the box from the desk towards her. She took one, let him light it for her, and blew the smoke out in a leisurely way.

"Well, what is it?" he asked, with a touch of irritation.

Still looking at him steadily, she said:

"You know well enough what it is, Michael. It is that this *will not do*."

He frowned.

"Ellen, I'll be glad if you'll keep out of it. If there is one person on this Station who is not directly involved, it is you."

"Nonsense, Michael. There is *not* one person. But it is just because I am the least involved that I have come to talk to you. Somebody *has* to talk to you. You can't afford just to let the pressure go on rising

while you stay in here, like Achilles sulking in his tent."

"A poor simile, Ellen. I have not quarreled with my leader. It is the rest who have quarreled with theirs—with me."

"That's not the way they see it, Michael."

He turned, and walked over to the window again. Standing there, with his face pale in the bright earthlight, he said:

"I know what they are thinking. They've shown it plainly enough. There's a pane of ice between us. The Station-Commander is now a pariah.

"All the old scores have come up to the surface. I am Ticker Troon's son—the man who got there by easy preferment. For the same reason I'm still here, at the age of fifty-five years over the usual grounding age; and keeping younger men from promotion. I'm known to be in bad with half-a-dozen politicians and much of the top brass in the Space-House. Not to be trusted in my judgment because I'm an enthusiast—i.e. a man with a one-track mind. Would have been thrown out years ago if they had dared to face the outcry — Ticker Troon's son, again. And now there's this."

"Michael," she said calmly.

"Just why are you letting this get you down? What's behind it?"

He looked hard at her for a moment before he said, with a touch of suspicion:

"What do you mean?"

"Simply what I say—what is behind this uncharacteristic outburst? You are perfectly well aware that if you had not earned your rank you would not be here—you'd have been harmlessly stowed away at a desk somewhere, years ago. As for the rest—well, it's mostly true. But the self-pity angle isn't like you. You *could* simply have cashed in and lain back comfortably for life on the strength of being Ticker Troon's son, but you didn't. You took the name he left you into your hand, and you deliberately *used* it for a weapon. It was a good weapon, and of course it made enemies for you, so of course they maligned you. But you know, and hundreds of thousands of people know, that if you had not used it as you did we should not be here today: there wouldn't be any British Moon-Station: and your father would have sacrificed himself for nothing."

"Self-pity—" he began, indignantly.

"Phoney self-pity," she corrected, looking at him steadily

He turned away.

"Would you like to tell me what the proper feeling is when, at a time of crisis, the men that you have worked with, and for—men that you thought had loyalty and respect, even some affection, for you, turn icy cold, and send you to coventry? It certainly is not the time to feel pride of achievement, is it?"

She let the question hang for a moment, then:

"Understanding?" she suggested. "A more sympathetic consideration of the other man's point of view—and the state of his mind, perhaps?" She paused for several seconds. "We are none of us in a normal state of mind," she went on. "There is far too much emotion compressed in this place for anyone's judgment to be quite rational. It's harder for some than for others. *And* we don't all have quite the same things uppermost in our minds," she added.

Troon made no reply. He continued to stand with his back to her, gazing steadily out of the window. Presently, she walked across to stand beside him.

The view outside was bleak. In the foreground an utterly barren plain; a flatness brok-

en only by various sized chunks of rock, and occasionally the rim of a small crater. The harshness of it was hard on the eyes; the lit surfaces so bright, the shadows so stygian that, if one looked at any one part too long, it dazzled, and seemed to dance about.

Beyond the plain, the mountains stuck up like cardboard cutouts. Eyes accustomed to the weathered mountains of Earth found the sharpness, the height, the vivid jaggedness of them disturbing. Newcomers were always awed, and usually frightened, by them. 'A dead world,' they always said, as they looked on the view for the first time, and they said it in hushed voices, with a feeling that they were seeing the ultimate dreadful place.

Too facile, too earthbound a sensation, Troon often thought. Death implied corruption, decay, and change, but on the moon there was nothing to corrupt, nothing that could change. There was only the impersonal savagery of nature, random, eternal, frozen, and senseless. Something that the Greeks had glimpsed in their conception of Chaos.

Over the horizon to the right hung a fluorescent quar-

ter-segment of the Earth; a wide wedge bounded on one side by the night line, and serrated at the base by the bare teeth of the mountains.

For more than a minute Troon gazed at its cold, misted blue light before he spoke. Then:

"The idiot's delight," he said.

The doctor nodded slowly.

"Without doubt," she agreed. "And there—there we have it, don't we?"

She turned away from the window and went back to the chair.

"I know," she said, "or perhaps I should say, I like to think I know, what this place means to you. You fought to establish it; and then you had to fight to maintain it. It has been your job in life; the purpose of your existence; the second foothold on the outward journey. Your father died for it; you have lived for it. You have mothered, more than fathered, an ideal: and you have to learn, as mothers learn, that there has to be a weaning.

"Now, up there, there is war. It has been going on for ten days—at God knows what cost: the worst war in history—perhaps even the last. Great cities are holes in the ground; whole countries are black ash-

es; seas have boiled up in vapor, and fallen as lethal rain. But still new pillars of smoke spring up, new lakes of fire spread out, and more millions of people die.

"The idiot's delight," you say. But to what extent are you saying that because you hate it for what it is; and to what extent are you saying it from fear that your work will be ruined—that there may come some turn of events that will drive us off the moon? Can you answer that?"

Troon walked slowly back, and seated himself on a corner of the desk.

"All reasons for hating war are good," he said, "but some are better than others. If you hate it and want to abolish it simply because it kills people—well, there are a number of popular inventions, the car and the air-plane, for instance, that you might do well to abolish for the same reason. It is cruel and evil to kill people—but their deaths in war are a symptom, not a cause. I hate war partly because it is stupid—which it has been for a long time—but still more because it has recently become *too* stupid, and *too* wasteful, and *too* dangerous."

"I agree. And then, too, of course, much of what it wastes

could otherwise be used to further Project Space."

"Certainly, and why not? Here we are at last, close to the threshold of the universe, with the greatest adventure of the human race just ahead of us, and still this witless, parochial bickering goes on — getting nearer to race suicide every time it flares up."

"And yet," she pointed out, "if it were not for the requirements of strategy we should not be here now."

He shook his head.

"Strategy is the ostensible reason perhaps, but it is not the *only* reason. We are here because the quintessential quality of our age is that of dreams coming true. Just think of it. For centuries we have dreamt of flying; recently we made that come true: we have always hankered for speed; now we have speeds greater than we can stand: we wanted to speak to far parts of the Earth; we can: we wanted to explore the sea bottom; we have: and so on, and so on: and, too, we wanted the power to smash our enemies utterly; we have it. If we had truly wanted peace, we should have had that as well. But true peace has never been one of the genuine dreams—we have got little further than preaching against war in order to

appease our consciences. The truly wishful dreams, the many-minded dreams are now irresistible — they become facts.

"We may reach them devously, and almost always they have an undesired obverse: we learned to fly, and carried bombs; we speed, and destroy thousands of our fellow men; we broadcast, and we can lie to the whole world. We can smash our enemies, but if we do, we shall smash ourselves. And some of the dreams have pretty queer midwives, but they get born all the same."

Ellen nodded slowly.

"And reaching for the moon was one of what you call the truly wishful dreams?"

"Of course. For the moon, first; and then, one day, for the stars. This is a realization. But there—" He pointed out of the window at the Earth, "—down there they are seeing us as a hateful silver crescent which they fear—that is the obverse of this particular dream.

"Nobody hated the moon until we reached it. For thousands of years it has been worshipped, honored and prayed to. Lovers sighed to it, children cried for it. It was Isis, and Diana, it was Selene, kissing her sleeping Endymion

—and now we have identified it with Siva, the destroyer. So they are hating it now, because of us; and well they may. We have violated an ancient mystery, shattered an infinite serenity, trampled down antique myths, and smeared its face with blood.

"That is the obverse, ugly and ignoble. Yet it is better that it should have been done at this cost than that it should not have been done at all. Most births are painful, and none are pretty."

"You're very eloquent," said the doctor, a little wondering.

"Aren't you, on your own subject?"

"But would you be telling me, in an elaborate way, that the end justifies the means?"

"I am not interested in justifying. I am simply saying that certain practices which may be unpleasant in themselves can produce results which are not. There is many a flower that would not be growing if the dung had not happened to fall where it did. The Romans built their empire with savage cruelty, but it did make European civilization possible; because America prospered on slave labor, she was able to achieve independence; and so on. And now, because the armed forces wanted a position of strategic

advantage, they have enabled us to start out into space."

"To you, then, this Station—" she waved an encompassing hand, "—this is simply a jumping-off place for the planets?"

"Not simply," he told her. "At present it is a strategic outpost—but its potentialities are far more significant."

"Far more important, you mean?"

"As I see it—yes."

The doctor lit a cigarette, and considered in silence for a few moments. Then she said:

"There seems to me very little doubt that most people here have a pretty accurate idea of your scale of values, Michael. It would not be news to you, I suppose, that with the exception of three or four—and the Astronomical Section which is starry-eyed, anyway—almost nobody shares them?"

"It would not," he said. "It has not been, for years; but it is only lately that it has become a matter of uncomfortable importance. Even so, millions of people *can* be wrong—and often have been."

She nodded, and went on, equably:

"Well, suppose we take a look at it from their point of

view. All the people here volunteered, and were posted here as a garrison. They did not, and they do not, consider it primarily as a jumping-off place—though I suppose some of them think it may become that one day—now, at this moment, they are seeing it as what it was established to be—a Bombardment Station: a strategic position from which a missile can be placed within a five-mile circle drawn anywhere on Earth. That, they say, and quite truly say, is the reason for the Station's existence; and the purpose for which it is equipped. It was built—just as the other Moon Stations were built—to be a threat. It was hoped that they would never be used, simply because the knowledge of their existence would be an incentive to keep the peace.

"Well, that hope has been wiped out. God knows who, or what, really started this war, but it has come. And what happened? The Russian Station launched a salvo of missiles. The American Station began pumping out a systematic bombardment. The moon, in fact, went into action. But what part did the British Station play in this action? It sent off just three, medium-weight missiles!"

"The American Station

spotted that Russian Freight-rocket coming in, and got it, with a light missile. The Russian Station—and, by the look of it, one of the Russian Satellites — thereupon hammered the American Station, which erupted missiles for a time, both local and Earthward-bound, and then suddenly went quiet. The Russian Station kept on sending missiles at intervals for a time, then it, too, went quiet.

"And what were we doing while all this was going on? We were sending off three more, medium-sized missiles. And since the Russian Station stopped, we have contributed another three.

"Nine medium-sized missiles! Our total part in the war, to date!"

"Meanwhile, the real war goes on up there. And what's happening in it? Nobody knows. One minute's news is corrected, or denied, a few minutes later. There's propaganda to dishearten; there's wishful thinking, obvious lying, clever lying, incoherence, and hysteria. There may even be a few grains of truth somewhere, but nobody knows which they are.

"All we do know for sure is that the two greatest powers there have ever been are out

to destroy one another with every weapon they possess. Hundreds of cities and towns must have vanished, and all the people in them. Whole continents are being scorched and ruined.

"Is either side winning? Can either side win? Will there be anything left? What has happened to our own country, and our homes? We don't know!"

"And we do nothing! We just sit out here, and look at the Earth, all calm and pearly-blue, and wonder hour after hour—day after day, now—what horrors are going on under the clouds. Thinking about our families and friends, and what may have happened to them . . .

"The wonder to me is that so few of us, as yet, have cracked up. But I warn you, professionally, that if things go on like this, more of us will before long . . .

"Of course the men brood, and become more desperate and rebellious as it goes on. Of course they ask themselves what we are here for at all, if not to be used. Why have we not fired our big missiles? Perhaps they would not count a great deal in the scale of things, but they'd be something: we'd be doing what we can. They were the reason we

were sent here — so why haven't we fired them? Why didn't we fire them at the beginning, when they would have had most effect? The other Stations did. Why have we still not fired them, even now? Can you tell us that?"

She ended, looking at him steadily. He looked back at her, just as steadily.

"I don't plan the strategy," he said. "It is not my job to understand top-level decisions. I am here to carry out the orders I receive."

"A very proper reply, Station-Commander," commented the doctor, and went on waiting. He did not amplify, and she found the continuation thrown back on her.

"They tell me," she observed, "that we have something like seventy major missiles, with atomic warheads. It has frequently been pointed out that the earlier the big blows fall, the more effective they are in destroying the enemy's potential—and in preventing retaliation. The aim, in fact, is the quick knock-out. But there our missiles still rest—unused even now."

"Their use," Troon pointed out again, "is not for us here to decide. It is possible that the first inter-continental missiles did what was required—

in which case it would simply be waste to launch these. It is not impossible, either, that if they are held in reserve there could be a point when our ability to continue the bombardment might be decisive."

She shook her head.

"If the strategic targets have been destroyed, what is there left for decisive bombardment? These aren't weapons for use against armies in the field. What is worrying our personnel is, why weren't our weapons used — on the right kind of targets, at the right time?"

Troon shrugged.

"This is a pointless discussion, Ellen. Even if we were able to fire without orders, what should we aim at? We've no idea which targets have been destroyed, or which are only damaged. Indeed, for all we know, some of the target areas may now be occupied by our own people. If we had been needed, we should have had the orders."

The doctor remained quiet for a full half minute, making up her mind. Then she said, forthrightly:

"I think you had better understand this, Michael. If there is not some use made of these missiles very soon, or if there is not some intelligible statement about them from

H.Q., you are going to have a mutiny on your hands."

The Commander sat quite still on the corner of the desk, looking not at her, but towards the window. Presently:

"As bad as that?" he asked.

"Yes, Michael. About as bad as it can be, short of open rebellion."

"M. I wonder what they think they'll get out of that."

"They aren't thinking much at all. They're worried sick, frustrated, feeling desperate, and needing some kind—any kind—of action to relieve the tension."

"So they'd like to unhorse me, and poop off major atomic missiles, just for the hell of it."

She shook her head, looking at him unhappily.

"It's not exactly that, Michael. It's—oh dear, this is difficult—it's because a rumor has got around that they *should* have been sent off."

She watched him as the implication came home. At length, he said, with icy calmness:

"I see. I am supposed to have the other Nelson touch—the blind eye?"

"Some of them say so. A lot of the rest are beginning to wonder."

"There has to be a reason. Even a Commanding Officer

must be supposed to have a motive for dereliction of duty amounting to high treason."

"Of course, Michael."

"Well, I'd better have it. What is it?"

Ellen took a deep breath.

"It's this. So long as we don't send those missiles we may be safe: once we do start sending them we'll probably bring down retaliation, either from the Russian Station, if it still exists, or from one of their Satellites. Our nine medium missiles haven't been a serious matter — not serious enough to justify them into provoking us to use our heavies. But, if we *do* start to use the major ones, it will almost certainly mean the end of this Station. Your own view of the primary importance of the Station is well known—you admitted it to me just now . . . So, you see, a motive can be made to appear . . .

"The American Station has almost certainly gone; possibly the Russian, too. If we go as well, there will no longer be anyone on what you called the 'threshold of the universe'. *But*, if we were able somehow to ride out the war, we should be in sole possession of the moon, and still on the 'threshold' . . . Shouldn't we?"

"Yes. You make the motive

quite uncomfortably clear," he told her. "But an ambition is not necessarily an obsession, you know."

"This is a closed community, in a high state of nervous tension."

He thought for some moments, then:

"Can you predict? Will it produce a revolution, or a mass-rising?" he asked her.

"A revolution," she said, without hesitation. "Your officers will arrest you, once they have plucked up the courage. That could take a day or two yet. It is a pretty grim step—especially when the C.O. happens to be a popular figure, too . . ." She shrugged her shoulders.

"I must think," he said.

He went around behind the desk and sat down, resting his elbows on it. The room became as quiet as the construction of the Station permitted while he considered behind closed eyes. After several minutes he opened them.

"If they should arrest me," he said, "their next move must be to search the message-files— (a) to justify themselves by finding evidence against me, and (b) to find out what the orders were, and whether they can still be carried out.

"When they discover that, except for three sets of three medium missiles, no launching orders have been received, there will be a panic. Such of my officers as may have been persuaded into this will be utterly shattered — you can't just apologize to your C. O. for arresting him as a traitor, and expect it to be left at that.

"There will be just one hope left, so someone more decisive than the rest will radio H.Q. that I have had a breakdown, or something of the kind, and request a repeat of all launching orders. When that brings nothing but a repetition of the same three sets of three, they'll be really sunk.

"Then, I should think, there will be a split. Some of them will have cold feet, and be for taking the consequences before matters get even worse; a number of men are bound to say 'in for a penny, in for a pound', and want to launch the missiles, anyway. Some will have swung back, and argue that if H.Q. wanted launchings they would have said so—so why risk a further act of wanton insubordination which will probably bring enemy reprisals, anyway.

"Even if good sense and cold feet were to win, and I should be released, I should

have lost much of my authority and prestige, and there would be a very, very sticky situation all the way round.

"On the whole, I think it would be easier for everyone if I were to swallow my pride and discourage my arrest by anticipating their second move."

He paused, contemplating the doctor.

"As you know, Ellen, it is not a habit of mine to reflect aloud in this manner. But I think it would do no harm if some idea of the probable results of my arrest were to filter round. Don't you agree?"

She nodded, without speaking. He got up from the desk.

"I shall now send for Sub-Commander Reeves — and I think we will have Sub-Commander Calmore as well—and explain to them with as little loss of face as possible that, the chances of war being what they are, and the chances of leakage now being nil, I am lifting security on messages received. This is being done in order that all senior officers may fully acquaint themselves with the situation, in readiness for any emergency.

"This should have enough deflationary effect to stop them making that particular kind of fool of themselves, don't you think?"

"But won't they just say that you must have destroyed the relevant messages?" she objected.

"Oh, that one wouldn't do. There's service procedure. They will be able to compare my file with the Codes Section's files, and that with the Radio Section's log-book, and they'll find they all tie up."

She went on studying him.

"I still don't understand why our missiles have not been launched," she said.

"No? Well, perhaps all will be revealed to us one day. In the meantime — suppose we just go on obeying our orders. It's really much simpler.

"But I am extremely grateful to you, Ellen. I had not thought it had got so far, yet. Let's hope that tomorrow will show, if not a great change of feeling, at least a less awkward choice of scapegoat. And now, if you will excuse me, I will send for those two."

As the door closed behind her, he continued to stare at it for fully a minute. Then he flipped over a switch, and requested the presence of his Sub-Commanders.

With the interview over, Troon allowed a few minutes for the officers to get clear. They had gone off looking a little winded, one carrying the

message-file, the other his signed authority of access to the code files. Then, feeling the need for a change, he, too, left his room, and made his way to the entrance-port. In the dressing-room the man on duty jumped to his feet and saluted.

"Carry on, Hughes," Troon told him. "I'm going outside for an hour or so."

"Yes, sir," said the man. He sat down and resumed work on the suit he was servicing.

Troon lifted his own scarlet pressure suit from its pegs, and inspected it carefully. Satisfied, he shed his uniform jacket and trousers, and got into it. He carried out the routine checks and tests; finally, he switched on the radio, and got an acknowledgement from the girl at the main instrument desk. He told her that he would be available for urgent calls only. When he spoke again his voice reached the duty man from a loud-speaker on the wall. The man got up, and moved to the door of the smaller, two-man airlock.

"An hour, you said, sir?" he inquired.

"Make it an hour and ten minutes," Troon told him.

"Yes, sir." The man set the hand of the reminder-dial seventy minutes ahead of the clock. If the Station-Com-

mander had not returned, or had failed to notify an extension by then, the rescue squad would automatically be summoned.

The duty-man operated the lock, and presently Troon was outside; a vivid splash of color in the monochrome landscape, the only moving thing in the whole wilderness. He set off southward with the curious, lilting moon-step which long service had made second nature.

At half a mile or so he paused, and made a show of inspecting one or two of the missile-pits there. They were, as they were intended to be, almost invisible. The top of each shaft had a cover of stiff fibre which matched the color of the ground about it. A scatter of sand and stones on top made it difficult to detect, even at a few yards. He pottered from one to another for a few minutes, and then stood looking back at the Station.

It was dwarfed and made toy-like by the mountains behind it. The radar and radio towers, and the sun-bowls looking like huge artificial flowers on the top of their masts, gave a rough scale; but for them it would have been difficult to judge whether the Station itself was the size of a

half-inflated balloon, or half a puff-ball. It was hard to appreciate that the main body was a hundred and twenty yards in diameter at ground level until one looked at the corridors connecting it with the smaller, storage-domes, and remembered that the roofs of those corridors were four feet above one's head.

Troon continued to regard it for some moments, then he turned round, pursued a zig-zag course between the missile-pits, and when he was hidden from the Station by a rocky outcrop, sat down. There he leaned back and, in such modified comfort as the suit allowed, contemplated the prospect dominated by the bright segment of Earth—and also the shape of the future in a world ruined by war.

All his life—and, for the matter of that, all his father's life, too—the possibility of such a war had lurked in the background. Sometimes it had seemed imminent, but there had been rapprochements; then again, it had seemed inevitable, but in one way or another it had been avoided. Again and again the tensions had increased, and relaxed. There had been conferences, concessions, compromises, bluffs, crises, and occasional panic moves, but through

them all the taper had somehow been kept at a safe distance from the touchhole.

Three years ago, when he had once more, and certainly for the last time, managed to stave off "grounding," he had felt an increased sense of imminence. It was difficult to be sure that the placidity of his spells on the moon did not give a distorted impression that life at home was becoming more febrile and exhausting each leave, but of one thing he was convinced—he had no intention of spending his retirement in one of the regions that grew tense with the jitters two or three times every year.

It was for that reason he had sold his house—the house that had been presented to his mother in tribute to the memory of his father—and moved his family four thousand miles to a new home in Jamaica.

Ridding himself of the house had been satisfactory in another way, too, for to him it had symbolized the super-human obligation of living up to his father's legendary reputation; it had been a solidification of the shadows that his father had unwittingly cast over him since he was twelve years old.

Looking back on his life, it was only those years before he was twelve that appeared sunlit and halcyon. He, his mother, and his grandfather had then lived quietly and happily in a roomy cottage. They had their friends and neighbors; he had his own school friends in the village; beyond that small circle they had been, except for his grandfather's reputation as a classical scholar, unnoticed and unknown. And then, in the September of his thirteenth year, had come the break-up.

A man called Tallence had somehow stumbled across the story of Ticker Troon and the missile, and had applied to the authorities for the lifting of the security ban. After twelve years there was no good reason for silence—and, indeed, had been none for some time. Four Satellite Stations had for several years been known to be in position—the British one, two fair-sized Russian ones, and the huge American one. The existence of space-mines was no longer a secret, nor was the fact that all the Stations now carried means to combat them. Tallence, therefore, had managed to carry his point and, presently, to produce his book.

It was a good book, and the

publishers spared nothing on the publicity that launched it; the conveniently timed citation of a posthumous V. C. for Ticker Troon helped, too; and the book went straight into the epic class. It sold by the hundred thousands; it was seized upon by translators at once, and went into all languages save those allied with the Intransigent Sixth, where it was believed that the first Satellite was Soviet invention. It was filmed, televised, digested, and strip-treated until, a year later, there was scarcely a man, woman, or child outside the Soviet Empire who did not know of Ticker Troon and his exploit.

For his son, it had been all very exciting at first. Suddenly to discover that one had a hero father, to be invited to big parties, to have newswriters and cameramen besieging, to take the seat of honor at a premiere, to be introduced on platforms, were great thrills. Soon, however, he had become awkwardly conscious of his ignorance, and of people's disappointment when their talk of space meant nothing to him. To overcome that, he had begun to read books on astronomy and spacework. In them he

learnt that his grandfather had not been fully informative in teaching him that the Pleiades were the seven daughters of Atlas, that Venus emerged from the sea, that Orion was the great hunter who met his match in Diana. And as he read he, too, had seemed to hear "the far gnat-voices cry, star to faint star across the sky."

The excitement of being a public figure had soon worn off. The sense of being watched became distasteful. The feeling that he was expected to be exceptional weighed upon him at school, and only slightly less when he went up to Oxford. The house that his mother had accepted with a feeling of reluctant obligation never had the quality of home that there had been in the cottage. His mother seemed to be forever socially busy now; his new interests were not shared by his grandfather; it seemed impossible to remain unminded for an hour that he was the son of Ticker Troon—and that was rather like finding one had Sir Francis Drake, Lord Nelson, or the National Gallery, for a father.

His discovered fascination with the problems of space made it worse; as if a part of him had turned traitor and conspired to draw him away

from his old interests, and deeper into his father's shadow. He tried hard to retain the belief that Phoebus Apollo was more interesting than Phoebus, the Eye of Heaven; that Mars, as the alias of the roughneck son of Zeus and Hera, had more significance than Mars, the nearest and potentially most attainable of the planets; that Aristotle, the Peripatetic, was of more importance than the crater on the moon that had been named after him, but in vain. An unquenchable curiosity had sprung alight in his mind, and presently he had been forced to admit that though his father's qualities might be beyond him, he had certainly inherited his one passionate interest. With that once decided, he had been willing to set about using his name to further it, and he had entered the Service.

He had, at first, used it quite diffidently. He did not seek publicity; that was not necessary, but neither did he shun it any longer. He avoided the cheaply sensational, but he was not unaware that more restrained publicity was gradually building him into a somebody in the public mind. When the press asked for his opinion on spatial questions,

he gave it with careful consideration—and he was in a strong enough position to cause trouble over any misrepresentation. He adopted a deliberate policy, and, little by little, by the time he was twenty-five, he had built the space-hero's son into the ordinary man's oracle on space.

He did not do it without arousing jealousies, but his popular position was solid, his discretion carefully judged. He was known to work hard, he saw to it that his service record was good, he knew that his opinions had started to carry weight.

Troon's first brush with the politicians had followed the announcement (a premature announcement, in point of fact) that the Russians were about to set up a Moon Station. The immediate effect of this was that the Americans, who had got into the habit of regarding the moon as a piece of U. S.-bespoken real estate that they would get around to developing when they were ready, were shocked into intense activity. The press wanted, as usual, to know Lieutenant Troon's views on the situation. He had them ready, and they made their first appearance in a responsible Sunday newspaper with an influential circulation.

He was well aware of the situation. A Moon Station was not a thing that could be set up for just a few million pounds. It could not but entail an expenditure that the government would be alarmed to contemplate, and he knew that the official policy would be to discourage any suggestion of a British Moon Station as a frivolous and profligate project, minimizing, or brushing aside, all arguments in its favor.

In his short article, Troon had mentioned the advantages to strategy and to science, but had dwelt chiefly upon prestige. Failure to establish such a Station would be a turning point in British policy; it would amount to the first concrete confession that Britain was content to drop out of the van; that, in fact, it was now willing to admit itself as a second—or third-rate power. It would be public confirmation of the view, held in many circles for some time now, that the British had had their day, and were dwindling into their sunset; that all their greatness would soon lie with that of Greece, Rome, and Spain—in their past.

Troon's first carpeting over the matter was by his C. O. He then trod a number of as-

cending carpets until he found himself facing a somewhat pompous Under-Secretary who began, as the rest had done, by pointing out that he had broken Service regulations by publishing an unapproved article, and then worked round by degrees to the suggestion that, he might, upon reconsideration, find that a Moon Station had little strategic superiority to an armed Satellite Station, and that if the Americans and Russians did build them, they would be wasting material and money.

"Moreover, I am able to tell you confidentially," the Under-Secretary had added, "that this is also the view of the American authorities themselves."

"Indeed, sir," said Troon. "In that case it seems odd that they should be doing it, doesn't it?"

"They would not be, I assure you, but for the Russians. Clearly, the moon cannot be left entirely to Russian exploitation. So, as the Americans can afford to do it, they are doing it in spite of their views on its worth. And since they are, it is not necessary for us to do so."

"You think, sir, that it will do us no harm to be seen standing on American feet in-

stead of on our own in this enterprise?"

"Young man," said the Under-Secretary severely, "there are many pretensions which are not worth the price they would exact. You have been unpatriotic enough to suggest in print that our sun is setting. I emphatically deny that. Nevertheless, it has to be admitted that whatever we have been, and whatever we may yet be, we are not, at present, one of the wealthier nations. We cannot afford such an extravagance for mere ostentation."

"But if we do keep out of this, sir, our prestige cannot fail to suffer, whatever arguments we may advance. As for the American denial of strategic value, I have heard it before; and I continue to regard it as wool-pulling. A Moon Station would be far less vulnerable, and could mount vastly greater fire power, than any Satellite Station."

The Under-Secretary's manner had become cold.

"My information does not support that statement. Nor does the policy of the Government. I must therefore request you . . ."

Troon had heard him out politely and patiently. He

knew, and he was sure that the Under-Secretary must know, too, that the damage already done to the declared policy was considerable. There would be a campaign for a Moon Station, certainly. Even if he were publicly to reverse his views, or even if he were to remain silent, the newspapers would enjoy tilting at those who had brought pressure to bear on him. He had only to behave circumspectly for a few weeks while the campaign gathered force, to refuse to give opinions where he had been ready to give them before, and perhaps look a little rueful in his silence. . . . There would have been a campaign in some of the popular papers in any case; the main effect of his making his views known early was that in the public mind he appeared as the Moon Station's most important advocate.

In a few weeks, feeling among the electors had become clear enough to worry the government, and produce a rather more conciliatory tone. It was conceded that a British Moon Station *might* be considered, if the estimates were satisfactory. The prodigious size of the estimates which were produced, however, came as a shock which

sharpened the divided opinions.

At this point, the Americans took a kindly hand. They had apparently changed their views on the value of Moon Stations, and, having done so, felt that it would be advantageous for the West to have two such Stations to the rival's one. Accordingly, they offered to advance a part of the cost, and supply much of the equipment. It was a generous gesture.

"Good old Uncle Sam," said Troon, when the offer was announced. "Still the genial patron with two left feet."

He was right. There was a considerable body of opinion to demand: "Whose Moon Station is this supposed to be, anyway?"

Nevertheless, the number of noughts to the cost remained intimidating.

Presently there was a rumor in circulation that the wrong kind of thinking—to put it at its least slanderous—was going on at high levels, and that there was actually in existence a scheme by which a Station could be established at a cost very considerably under half the present estimates; and that Troon (you know, son of Ticker Troon) thought well of it.

Troon had waited, quietly. Presently, he found himself again invited to high places. He was modestly surprised, and could not think how the proposal came to be connected with his name but, as a matter of fact, well, yes; he did happen to have seen a scheme. . . . Oh no, it was quite an error to think it had anything to do with him, a complete misunderstanding. The idea had been worked out by a man called Flanderys. It certainly had some interesting points. Yes, he did know Flanderys slightly. Yes, he was sure that Flanderys would be glad to explain his ideas. . . .

The American and Russian expeditions seemed, in so far as their claims had ever been sorted out, to have arrived on the moon simultaneously; the former landing in Copernicus, the latter in Ptolemy—both claiming priority, and both consequently announcing their annexation of the entire territory of the moon. Experience with the Satellite Stations had already shown that any romantic ideas of a *pax coelestis* should be abandoned but, as each expedition was highly vulnerable, both concerned themselves primarily with tunneling into the rock in order to establish strong-

holds from which they would be able to dispute their rights with greater confidence.

Some six months later, the smaller British expedition set down in the crater of Archimedes, with the Russian six hundred miles away beyond the Apennine Mountains to the south, and the American four hundred miles or so to the north-east. There, in contrast with their intensively burrowing neighbors, they proceeded to establish themselves on the surface. They had, it was true, one drilling-machine, but this, compared with the huge tunneling engines of the others that had cost a good many times their weight in uranium to transport, was a mere toy which they employed in sinking a series of six-foot diameter pits.

The Flanderys Dome, essentially a modification of Domes used in the Arctic for some years, was a simple affair to erect. It was spread out on a leveled part of the crater floor, coupled with hoses, and left to inflate. With only the light gravity of the moon weighing down its fabric, the outer casing was fully shaped at a pressure of eight pounds (Earth) per square inch, at fifteen it was perfectly taut. Then the contents of

the various rockets and containers went into it through the airlocks, or the annuli. The air regenerating plants were started up, the temperature controls coupled, and the work of building the Station inside the dome could begin.

The Americans, Troon recalled, had been interested. They reckoned it quite an idea for use on a moon where there did not happen to be any Russians about; but on one where there were, they thought it plain nuts, and said so. The Russians themselves, he remembered with a smile, had been bewildered. A flimsy contrivance that could be completely wrecked by a single, old-fashioned h.e. shell was in their opinion utter madness, and a sitting temptation. They did not, however, yield to the temptation since that would almost certainly precipitate untimely action by the Americans. Nevertheless, the presumption of a declining Power in arriving to settle itself blandly and unprotected in the open while two great Powers were competing to tunnel themselves hundreds of feet into the rock was a curious piece of effrontery. Even a less suspicious mind than the Russian could well have felt that there was something here that was not meeting the

eye. They instructed their agents to investigate.

The investigation took a little time, but presently the solution forthcame—an inconvenient clarification. As had been assumed, the pits that the British had been busily drilling at the same time that they built their Station into the Dome, were missile-shafts. This was similar to the work being done by the other two parties themselves—except that where the Americans also used pits, the Russians favored launching ramps. The more disturbing aspect of it came to light later.

The British system of control, it appeared, was to use a main computing-engine to direct the aim and setting of any missile. Once the missile had been launched, it was kept on course by its own computor and servo systems. The main computor was, unlike the rest of the Station, protected in a chamber drilled to a considerable depth. One of its more interesting features was that in certain conditions it was capable of automatically computing for, and dispatching, missiles until all were gone. A quite simple punched-card system was used in conjunction with a

chronometer; each card being related to a selected target. One of the conditions which would cause this pack of cards to be fed to the computor was a drop in the Station's air-pressure. Fifteen pounds per square inch was its normal, and there was allowance for reasonable variation. Should the Dome be so unfortunate, however, as to suffer a misfortune sufficient to reduce the air-pressure to seven pounds, the missile-dispatching mechanism would automatically go into action.

All things considered, it appeared highly desirable from the Russian point of view that the Flanderys Dome should not suffer any such misadventure.

During the years that had intervened between the establishment of the Station, and his succeeding to command of it, Troon had taken part in a number of expeditions. Some, such as that which had visited the Apennines, had consisted of fourteen or fifteen men traveling with their supplies on tractors, surveying, mapping, photographing as they went; spending their sleeping periods in small Flanderys Domes holding several men, where they could remove their pressure-suits to eat and at-

tain some degree of comfort. Others, ranging further, were two, three, or four-man trips on jet-borne platforms. Tractor operations were limited by the huge cracks which radiated from the crater to form impassable obstacles, many of them more than a hundred miles in length and a mile wide. The cracks were at most times awesome clefts of unknown, inky depth. Only when the sun was overhead, or shining up their length, was one able to see the rocky debris which choked them, several miles below, and it was only at such times that the geologists, turned selenologists, were able to take their jet-platforms down, and make their brief notes while the light lasted.

Troon, who had rapidly become something of a selenologist himself, had nursed from the time of the landing an ambition to see and record something of the moon's other side. According to rumor, the Russians had, within a year of their arrival sent an ill-fated expedition there, but the truth or otherwise of the report remained hidden by the usual Slav passion for secrecy. It was one of Troon's regrets that exploration would have to wait on further development of the jet-platforms, but

there was no reason to think that the invisible side held any surprises; photographs taken from circling rockets showed no more than a different pattern of the same pieces—mountains, "seas," and craters innumerable.

The regret that exploration must fall to someone else was no more than minor; most of what he had wanted to do, he had done. The establishment of the Moon Station was the end to which he had worked, maneuvered, and contrived. He had given Flanderys the idea of the Dome, and helped him to work it out; and, when that looked like being rejected for its vulnerability, he had briefed another friend to produce the solution of automatic reprisals which they had called Project Stalemate. It was better, he had thought then, and still thought, that the affair should appear to be a composite achievement rather than a one-man show. He was satisfied with his work.

He had almost reconciled himself to handing over the command in another eight months with the thought that the Station's future was secure, for, however much it might be grudged as a charge on the armed forces, the discovery of rare elements had given it practical importance,

the astronomers attached great value to the Station, and the medical profession, too, had found it useful for special studies.

But now there had come this war, and he was wondering whether that might mean the end of all the Moon Stations. If this one survived, would there be the wealth, or even the technical means, left to sustain it when the destruction was finished? Was it not very likely that everybody would be too busy trying simply to survive in a shattered world to concern themselves with such exotic matters as the conquest of space . . . ?

Well, there was nothing he could do about that—nothing but wait and see what the outcome was, and be ready to seize any opportunity that showed.

And it was still possible that there might be no one left on the moon by the time it was over. The signs were that the two giants had felled one another already. One could do no more than hope that the threat of Project Stalemate would continue to ward off attack by the Russian Satellite-Stations — if they were still in working order. . . . After all, the descent of some seventy fission, and

fission-fusion, bombs on one's country, would seem, even though that country was spread over one sixth of the habitable globe, to be a heavy price to pay for the destruction of one small Moon Station. . . . Yes, given luck, and some sense of relative values in the enemy's mind, the British Moon Station still had quite a chance of survival. . . .

Troon got up, and walked out from behind the rock. He stood for some moments, a lone scarlet figure in the black and white desert, looking at his Moon Station. Then, picking his path carefully between the missile-pits, made his unhurried way back to it.

At the end of dinner he asked if he might have the pleasure of the doctor's company at coffee in his office. Looking at her over the rim of his cup, he said:

"It would seem to have worked."

She regarded him quizzically through her cigarette smoke.

"Yes, indeed," she agreed. "Like a very hungry bacteriophage. I felt as if I were watching a film speeded up to twice natural pace." She paused, and then added: "Of course, I am not familiar with

the usual reactions of Commanding Officers who have been suspected of treason and stood in some danger of lynching, but one would not have been surprised at a little more—or—perturbation. . . ."

Troon grinned.

"A bit short on self-respect?" He shook his head. "This is a funny place, Ellen. When you have been here a little longer your own sense of values will seem a little less settled."

"I have suspected that already."

"But you still need to get the measure of it. My immediate predecessor once said: 'When I am on this singularly unheavenly cinder, I make it an invariable rule to assume that the emotional content of any situation is seventy-five per cent above par.' I don't know how he arrived at the seventy-five, but the principle is entirely right. You know, you yourself weren't far off sharing the general opinion this morning—it gave you a sense of the dramatic, an angle for the feeling of tension, and helped to relieve the boredom of the place. You would not have felt like that at home; and I should not have behaved as I did, at home; but here, the occasions for standing firm, and for bending, are

different. Technically, I am the C.O., with all the authority of the Crown behind me, and because of that we preserve certain forms; in practice, my job is more like a patriarch's. Sometimes rank and regulations have to be invoked; but we find it better to use them as little as we can."

"I have noticed that, too," she agreed.

"We realized when we came here that there would be particular problems, but we could not foresee all of them. We realized that we'd need men able to adapt to life in a small community, and because they would be restricted almost all the time to the Station, we had them vetted for claustrophobic tendencies, too. But it did not occur to anyone that, out here, they would have to contend with claustrophobia and agoraphobia at the same time. Yet it is so; we are shut in, in a vast emptiness—it made a pretty grim mental conflict for a lot of them, and morale went down and down. After a year of it the first Station-Commander began to battle for an establishment of women clerks, orderlies, and cooks. His report was quite dramatically eloquent. 'If this Station,' he wrote, 'is required to keep

to its present establishment then, in my considered opinion, a complete collapse of morale will follow in a short time. It is of the utmost importance that we take all practical steps which will help to give it the character of a normal human community. Any measures that will keep this wilderness from howling in the men's minds, and the horrors of eternity from frost-biting their souls, should be employed without delay.' Good Lyceum stuff, that, but true, all the same. There was a great deal of misgiving at home—but no lack of women volunteers; and when they did come, most of them turned out to be more adaptable than the men. And then, of course, the patriarchal aspect of the C.O.'s job came still more to the fore. It is no sort of a place for a disciplinarian to build up his ego; the best that can be done is to keep it working as harmoniously as possible.

"I have been here long enough to take its pulse fairly well as a rule, but this time I slipped up. Now, I don't want that to happen again, so I'd be glad of your further help to see that it doesn't. We've dislodged this particular source of trouble, but the

causes are still there; the frustrations are still buzzing about, and soon they are going to find a new place to swarm. I want the news early, the moment they look as if they have found it. Can I rely on you for that?"

"But, seeing that the cause—the immediate cause, that is—is H.Q.'s failure to use us, I don't see that there is anything here for them to concentrate the frustration on."

"Nor do I. But since they cannot reach the high-brass back home, they will find something or other to sublimate it on, believe me."

"Very well, I'll be your ear to the ground. But I still don't understand. Why—why *doesn't* H.Q. use these missiles? We know we should be plastered, wiped out, in an attempt to put the main computer out of action. But most of the men are past caring about that. They have reached a sort of swashbuckling, *götterdamerung* state of mind by now. They reckon that their families, their homes, and their towns must have gone, so they are saying: 'What the hell matters now?' There is still just a hope that we are being reserved for a final, smashing blow, but when that goes, I think they'll try to fire them themselves."

Troon thought a little, then he said:

"I think we have passed the peak of likelihood of desperate action. Now that they are sure that no firing orders were received, they must most of them swing over to the proposition that we are being conserved for some decisive moment—with the corollary that if our missiles are not available when they are called for, the whole strategy of a campaign could be wrecked. After all, could it not come to the point where the last man who still has ammunition holds the field? For all we can tell, we may at this very moment be representing a threat which dominates the whole situation. Someone could be saying: 'Unconditional surrender *now*. Or we'll bomb you again, from the moon.' If so, we are a rather emphatic example of 'they also serve . . .'"

"Yes," she said, after reflection. "I think that *must* be the intention. What other reason could there be?"

Troon looked thoughtfully after her as she left. Her predecessor would have spread such a theory, offered as her own, all round the Station in half an hour. He was not quite sure yet how much Ellen

talked, and who listened to her. However, that would soon reveal itself. In the meantime he turned to the day's reports, and spent an hour filling in the Station Log, and his own private log in its turn.

Before leaving the office, he went over to the window again. The scene had not changed greatly since "morning." The crater floor was still harsh in the sunlight of the long lunar day. The cutout mountains looked just the same, just the same as they had for ten million years. The nacreous Earth had moved only a few degrees, and still hung with the night-line half across her face, and the other half veiled.

Presently he sighed, and turned towards the door of his sleeping cabin. . . .

The jangle of the bedside telephone woke Troon abruptly. He had the handpiece to his ear before his eyes were well open.

"Radar Watch here, sir," said a voice, with a tinge of excitement behind it. "Two ufos observed approaching south-east by south. Height one thousand; estimated speed under one hundred."

"Two *what?*" inquired Troon, collecting his wits.

"Unidentified flying objects, sir."

He grunted. It was so long since he had encountered the term that he had all but forgotten it.

"You mean jet-platforms?" he suggested.

"Possibly, sir." The voice sounded a little hurt.

"You have warned the guard?"

"Yes, sir. They're in the lock now."

"Good. How far off are these—er—ufos?"

"Approximately forty miles now."

"Right. Pick them up tele-visually as soon as possible, and let me know. Tell switch-board to cut me in on the guard's link right away."

Troon put down the telephone, and threw back the bedcovers. He had barely put a foot on the floor when there was a sound of voices in his office next door. One, more authoritative than the rest, cut across the babble.

"Zero, boys. Open her up."

Troon, still in his pajamas went through to his office, and approached his desk. From the wall-speaker came the sound of breathing, and the creak of gear as the men left the lock. A voice said:

"Damned if I can see any bloody ufos. Can you, Sarge?"

"That," said the sergeant's voice patiently, "is south-east by south, my lad."

"Okay. But I still can't see a bloody ufo. If you—"

"Sergeant Witley," said Troon, into the microphone. A hush fell over the party.

"Yes, sir."

"How many are you?"

"Six men with me, sir. Six more following."

"Arms?"

"Light machine-gun and six bombs, each man, sir. Two rocket-tubes for the party."

"That'll do. Ever used a gun on the moon, Sergeant?"

"No, sir." There was a touch of reproof in the man's voice, but one did not waste ammunition that had cost several pounds a round to bring in. Troon said:

"Put your sights right down. For practical purposes there is no trajectory. If you do have to shoot, try to get your back against a rock; if you can't do that, lie down. Do *not* try to fire from a standing position. If you have not learnt the trick of it, you'll go into half a dozen back somersaults with the first burst. All of you got that?"

There were murmured acknowledgements.

"I don't for a moment sup-

pose it will be necessary to shoot," Troon continued, "but be ready. You will not initiate hostilities, but at any sign of a hostile act you, Sergeant, will reply instantly, and your men will give you support. No one else will act on his own. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. Carry on now, Sergeant Witley."

To a background sound of the sergeant making his dispositions, Troon hurried into his clothes. He was almost dressed when the same voice as before complained:

"Still I don't see no bloody —yes, I do, though, by God! Something just caught the light to the right of old Mammoth Tooth, see . . . ?"

At the same moment the telephone rang. Troon picked it up.

"Got the telly on them now, sir. Two platforms. Four men on one, five on the other. Scarcely any gear with them. Wearing Russian-type suits. Headed straight this way."

"Any weapons?"

"None visible, sir."

"Very well. Inform the guard."

He hung up, and listened to the sergeant receiving and acknowledging the message, while he finished dressing. Then he picked up the tele-

phone again to tell the switch-board:

"Inform the W.O.'s mess that I shall observe from there. And switch the guard link through to there right away."

He glanced at the looking-glass, picked up his cap, and left his quarters, with an air of purpose, but carefully unhurried.

When he arrived at the W.O.'s mess on the south-east side, the two platforms were already visible as shining specks picked out by the sunlight against the spangled black sky. His officers arrived at almost the same moment, and stood beside him, watching the specks grow larger. Presently, in spite of the distance, the clear airlessness made it possible to see the platforms themselves, the pinkish-white haze of the jets supporting them, and the clusters of brightly colored space-suits upon them. Troon did not try to judge the distance; in his opinion, nothing less precise than a range-finder was any use on the moon. He clicked-on the hand mike.

"Sergeant Witley," he instructed, "extend your men in a semi-circle, and detail one of them to signal the platforms down within it. Control, cut

my guard-link now, but leave me linked to you."

"Guard-link cut, sir."

"Is your standby with you?"

"Yes, sir."

"Tell her to search for the Russian intercom wavelength. It's something a little shorter than ours as a rule. When she finds it, she is to hold it until further notice. Does she speak Russian?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good. She is to report at once if there is any suggestion of hostile intention in their talk. Cut me in on the guard-link again now."

The two platforms continued smoothly towards them, dropping on a long slant as they came. The sergeant's men were prone, with their guns aimed. They were deployed in a wide crescent. In the middle of it stood a lone figure in a suit of vivid magenta, his gun slung, while he beckoned the platforms in with both arms. The platforms slowed to a stop a dozen yards short of the signaller, at a height of some ten feet. Then, with their jets blowing dust and grit away from under them, they sank gently down. As they landed, the space-suited figures on them let go of their holds, and showed empty hands.

"One of them is asking for you, sir, in English," Control told him.

"Cut him in," Troon instructed.

A voice with a slight foreign accent, and a trace of American influence said:

"Commander Troon, please allow me to introduce myself. General Alexei Goudenkovitch Budorieff, of the Red Army. I had the honor to command the Moon Station of the U.S.S.R."

"Commander Troon speaking, General. Did I understand you to say that you *had* that honor?"

He gazed out of the window at the platforms, trying to identify the speaker. There was something in the stance of a man in a searing orange suit that seemed to single him out.

"Yes, Commander. The Soviet Moon Station ceased to exist several earth-days ago. I have brought my men to you because we are—very hungry."

It took a moment for the full implication to register, and then Troon was not quite sure.

"You mean you have brought *all* your men, General?"

"All that are left, Commander."

Troon stared out at the little group of nine men in their vivid pressure-suits. The latest Intelligence Report, he recalled, had given the full complement of the Russian Station as three hundred and fifty-six. He said:

"Please come in, General. Sergeant Witley, escort the General and his men to the airlock."

The General gazed round at the officers assembled in their mess. Both he and his aide beside him were looking a great deal better for two large meals separated by ten hours of sleep. The lines of hunger and fatigue had left his face, though signs of strain remained.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I have decided to give you an account of the action at the Moon Station of the U.S.S.R. while it is fresh in my mind, for several reasons. One is that I consider it a piece for the history books—and for the military experts, too. Another is that, although it appears to have brought the campaign in this theater to a close, the war still continues, and none of us can tell what may happen to him yet. With this in mind, your Commander has pointed out that knowledge carried in a number of

heads has a better chance of survival than if it is restricted to two or three, and suggested that I, who am in a better position to give the account than anyone else, should speak to you collectively. This I am not only honored, but glad, to do, for it seems to me important that it should be known that our station fell to a new technique of warfare—an attack by dead men."

He paused to regard the faces about him, and then went on:

"What you call in English the booby-trap — something which is set to operate after a man has left it, or is dead; a kind of blind vengeance by which he hopes to do some damage still—that is nothing new; it is, one would imagine, as old as war itself. But a means by which dead men can not only launch, but can press home an attack—that, I think, is new indeed. Nor do I yet see where such a development may lead."

He paused again, and remained so long looking at the table in front of him that some of his audience fidgeted. The movement caught his attention, and he looked up.

"I will start by saying that, to the best of my knowledge, all life that still exists upon

the moon is now gathered here, in your Dome.

"Now, how did this come about? You are no doubt aware in outline of the first stages. We and the American Station opened our bombardments simultaneously. Neither of us attacked the other. Our orders were to disregard the American Station, and give priority to launching our Earthbound missiles. I have no doubt that their orders were similarly to disregard us. This situation persisted until, of our heavy missiles, only the strategic reserve remained. It might well have continued longer had not the Americans, with a light missile, destroyed our ir-coming supply-rocket. Upon this, I requested, and received, permission to attack the American Station, for we had a second supply-rocket already on the way, and hoped to save it from the same fate.

"As you know, the use of heavy, ground-to-ground missiles is not practicable here, nor would an attempt to use our small reserve for such a purpose have been permitted. We therefore retaliated with light missiles on high-angle setting to clear the mountains round the Copernicus crater. Again as you will know, the

low gravity here gives a wide margin of error for such an attempt, and our missiles were ineffective. The Americans attempted to reply with similar missiles, and they, too, were highly inaccurate. There was slight damage to one of our launching ramps, but no more.

"Then, one of our Satellite Stations which chanced to be in a favorable position dispatched two heavy missiles. The first they reported as being two miles off target; for the second, they claimed a direct hit. This would seem to be a valid claim, for the American Station ceased at once to communicate, and has shown no sign of life since.

"A reprisal attack on our own Station for the American Satellite was to be expected, and it came in the form of one heavy missile which landed within a mile of us. Our chief damage was fractures in the walls of the upper chambers, causing a considerable air-leakage. We had to close them off with bulkheads while we sent men in spacesuits to caulk the larger fissures and spray the walls and roofs with plastic sealing compound. The area of damage was extensive, and the work was hampered by falls from the roof, so that I decided to

remain incommunicado, in the hope of attracting no more missiles until we had stopped the leaks. It was to be hoped, too, that now the Satellites had been brought into the action ours might succeed in crippling the American with their wasps by the time we had made good."

"Wasps?" somebody interrupted.

"You haven't heard of them? I'm surprised. However, it can do no harm now. They are very small missiles, used in a spread-out flock. A Satellite can easily meet one, or several, ordinary missiles with counter-missiles and explode them at a safe distance, but with missiles that come to the attack like a shoal of fish, defense is difficult, and some will always get through—or so it is claimed."

"And did they, General?" Troon asked. He gave no indication of knowing that the British Satellite which his father had helped to construct, was disabled, and nothing had been heard from the American Satellite since the second day of hostilities.

The General shook his head.

"I cannot say. By the time we had our leaks repaired and our mast up again, there was a message from H.Q. saying

that it had lost touch with our Satellites. . . ."

His earlier formality had eased, and he went on more easily, as a man telling his story.

"We thought then that we had, as you say, come through. But it was not yet certain that there would be no further attack, or that more cracks in the roof might not open, so we kept our suits handy. That was very fortunate for some of us.

"Five earth-days ago—that is four whole days after the American Station was hit—the man on television watch thought that he caught a glimpse of something moving among the rocks on the crater floor to the north of us. It seemed improbable, but he held the masthead scanner on the area, and presently he caught another movement—something swiftly crossing a gap between two rocks—and he reported it. The Duty-Officer watched, too, and soon he also caught a snatch of movement, but it occurred too rapidly for him to be sure what it was. They switched in a telephoto lens, but it reduced the field of view, and showed them nothing but rocks, so they went back to the normal lens just in time to see what

looked like a smooth rock appear from the cover of one ordinary jagged rock, and slither behind another. At this point the Duty-Officer reported to me, and I went down to join them in the main control-chamber.

"Viewing conditions were difficult on account of the cross-light—the dawn had only begun the previous earth-day, so that the long shadows gave dark bars of cover, but anything that moved in the sunlight also threw a long shadow to catch the eye. After a few minutes' watching I had to agree that something, though I could not distinguish what, was moving out there, apparently in sharp, sudden dashes. Once, it paused in the open. We hurriedly cut in the telephoto lens again, but before we could focus, the thing had flashed away, and become invisible in a dark patch.

"We alerted the guard to stand by with rocket-tubes, and went on watching. The thing kept on dodging about, suddenly shooting out of a black shadow, or from behind a rock, and vanishing again. There was no doubt that it was gradually coming closer, but it seemed in no hurry to reach us.

"Somebody said: 'I think there must be two of them.'

The appearances and disappearances were so erratic, that we could not be sure. We tried radar on it, but at that angle and among so much broken rock, it was practically useless. We could only wait for the thing to reach more open ground, and show itself more clearly.

"Then there was a report from the guard of another moving object, somewhat further west. We turned the scanner that way, and observed that there was indeed a similar something there that dodged about among the rocks and shadows in the same, unidentifiable way.

"Over an hour went by before the first of them reached the more open ground at a range of eleven kilometers from us. But even then it was some time before we could get a real idea of it—for it was too small on the normal lens to show detail, and too erratic for the telephoto to follow it. Before long, however, there were three of the things all skirmishing wildly about the crater floor with sudden rushes forwards, sideways, any direction, even back, and never staying still long enough for us to make them out clearly in the crosslight.

"If our armament had in-

cluded short-range bombardment missiles, we should have used them at the first sighting, but they were not a weapon that had seemed reasonable equipment for a Moon-Station, and we could only wait for the things to come within practicable range of the portable rocket-tubes.

"Meanwhile they continued to dash hither and thither zig-zagging madly about the crater floor. It was uncanny. They made us think of huge spiders rushing back and forth, but they never froze as spiders do; their pauses were no more than momentary, and then they were off again; and one never could tell which way it would be. They must have been travling quite thirty or forty meters to make an advance of one meter, and they were in an extended line so that we could only get one, or perhaps, for a moment, two of them, on the screen at the same time.

"However, during the time it took them to cover the next two kilos we were able to get better views and impressions of them. In appearance they were simple. Take an egg, pull it out to double its length, and that is the shape of the body. Put long axles through it near the ends, and fasten tall, wide-tired wheels on them—

tall enough to give it a good ground clearance. Mount the wheels so that they have a hundred and eighty degrees of traverse—that is, so that the treads can be turned parallel with the lines of the axle, whether the wheels themselves are before or behind the axle. And you have this machine. It can move in any direction—or spin in one spot, if you want it to. Not, perhaps, very difficult once you have thought of the idea. Give it a motor in each wheel, and an electronic control to keep it from hitting obstacles. That is not very difficult, either.

"What is not so clear, is how you direct it. It was not, very clearly, by dead reckoning. We thought it might be responding to our radio, or to the rotation of our radar scanner, or to the movements of our television pickup, but we tested all those, and even switched off our screen for some minutes, but the guard outside reported no effect. Nor was it detecting and seeking any of our electric motors; we stopped every one of them for a full minute, without any result. It was just possible that the things were picking up an emanation from our power-pile, but that was well shielded, and we already had decoy radiators to

deflect any missiles that might try that. I myself think it probable that they were able to detect, and to respond to, the inevitable slight rise of temperature in the Station area. If so, there was nothing we could have done about it."

The General shrugged, shook his head, and frowned. He went on:

"What we faced, in essence, was a seeking missile, on wheels. Not difficult to construct, though scarcely worth attempting for use in a simple form—too easy a target for the defense. So what those Americans had done, the frightening thing they had done, was to introduce a random element. You see what I mean? They had put in this random stage, and somehow filtered the control through it. . . ."

He thought again for a moment.

"Machines do not live, so they cannot be intelligent. Nevertheless, it is in the nature of machines to be logical. The conception of an illogical machine seems to be a contradiction in terms. If you deliberately produce such a thing, what have you? Something that never existed in nature. Something alien. What you have done is to produce madness without mind.

You have made unreason animate, and set it loose. That is a very frightening thing to think about . . .

"But here, among these not-quite-machines that were scuttering about the crater floor like water-boatmen on a pond, there was a controlling thread of ultimate purpose running through the artificial madness. Their immediate actions were unpredictable, insane, but their final intention was just as sure as the bomb that each was carrying in its metal belly. Think of a maniac, a gibbering idiot, with one single continuing thread of intention—to murder . . .

"That is what those machines were. And they kept on coming with short, or very short, or not so short crazy rushes. They darted and dodged forward, sideways, backwards, obliquely, straight, or in a curve; one never knew which would be next—only that, after a dozen moves, they would be just a little closer.

"Our rocketmen opened fire at about five kilos. A sheer waste of course; one could as well have hoped to hit a fly on the wing with a peashooter. Mines might have stopped them—if they did not have detectors—but who would have

sanctioned the use of valuable rocket-space to bring mines to the moon? All our men could do was to hope for a lucky shot. Occasionally one of them would be hidden for a moment or two by the burst of an explosion, but it always reappeared out of the dust, dodging as crazily as ever. Our eyes and heads ached with the strain of trying to follow them on the screen, and to detect some pattern in their movements—I'm sure myself that no pattern existed.

"At three kilos the men were doing no better with their shooting, and were starting to show signs of panic. I decided that at two kilos we would withdraw the men and get them below.

"The things kept on coming, as madly as ever. I tell you, I have never seen anything that frightened me more. There was the dervish-like quality of the random madness, and yet the known deadly purpose. And all the time there was the suggestion of huge, scuttering insects so that it was difficult not to think of them as being in some alien way alive . . .

"Some of the rocket bursts did succeed in peppering them with fragments now and then, but they were not harmed. As they approached the two kilo line I told Colonel Zinochek,

here, to withdraw the patrol. He picked up the microphone to speak, and at that moment one of the things hit a rocket bomb. We saw it run right into the bomb.

"The explosion threw it off the ground, and it came down on its back. The diameter of the wheels was large enough to allow it to run upside down. It actually began to do so, but then there was a great glare, and the screen went blank.

"Even at our depth the floor of the chamber lifted under us, and cracks ran up two of the walls.

"I switched on the general address system. It was still live, but I could not tell how much of the Station it was reaching. I gave orders for everyone to put on spacesuits, and stand by for further instructions.

"One could hope that the explosion of one machine might have set off the others, but we could not tell. They might have been shielded at the moment, or, even if they were not, either, or both of them might have survived. Without air there is not the usual kind of blast and pressure-wave; there is flying debris, of course, but what else? So little work has been done on the precise effects of explosions

here. Our mast had gone again, so that we were without radar, or television. We had no means of telling whether the danger was over, or whether the machines were still scurrying about the crater floor like mad spiders; still working closer . . .

"If they were, we reckoned that it should take them about thirty-five minutes to reach us, at their former rate.

"No half-hour in my life has been as long as that one. Once we had our helmets on, and the intercoms were working, we did our best to learn what the damage was. It appeared to be fairly extensive in the upper levels, for there were few replies from there. I ordered all who could to make their way down to the lowest levels, and to stay there.

"Then there was absolutely nothing we could do but wait . . . and wait . . . and wait . . . Wondering if the things were indeed still skirmishing outside, and watching the minute-hand crawl round . . .

"It took them—or it—exactly thirty-one minutes . . .

"The whole place bounced, and threw me off my feet. I had a glimpse of cracks opening in the roof and walls, then the light went out, and something fell on me . . .

"I don't need to go into details about the rest. Four of us in the control-chamber were left alive, and five in the level immediately above. None of us would have survived had the rock had earth-weight—nor should we have been able to shift it to clear a way to the emergency exit.

"Even so, it took us four Earth-days to dig our way through the collapsed passages. All the Station's air was gone, of course, and we had to do it on dead men's air-bottles, and emergency rations—as long as the rations lasted—and with only one two-man inflatable chamber between us to eat in.

"The emergency exit was, of course, at some distance from the main entrance, but even so, a part of the roof of the terminal chamber had fallen in and wrecked one of the platforms there; fortunately the other two were scarcely damaged. The outer doors of the airlock were at the base of a cliff, and though the cliff itself had been a shield from the direct force of the explosion, a quantity of debris had fallen in front of the doors so that we had to blast them open. That gave us a big enough opening to sail the platforms through, and avoid any radio-active con-

tamination—and, I think, by reason of the airlock's position, any serious exposure to radiation ourselves."

He looked round at the group of officers.

"It has been chivalrous of you, gentlemen, to take us in. Let me, in return, assure you that we have no intention of making ourselves a liability. On the contrary. There is a large food store in our Station. If the cisterns have remained intact, there is water; also, there are air-regeneration supplies. But we need drilling gear to get at these things. If, when my men are rested, you can let us have the necessary gear, we shall be able to add very considerably to your reserves here."

He returned to the window, and looked at the shining segment of Earth.

"—And that may be as well, for I have a feeling that we may be going to need all the supplies we can collect."

When the meeting was broken up, Troon took the General and his aide along to his own office. He let them seat themselves, and light cigarettes before he said:

"As you will understand, General, we are not equipped here to deal with prisoners of war. I do not know your men.

Our Station is vulnerable. What guarantee can you give against sabotage?"

"Sabotage!" exclaimed the General. "Why should there be sabotage? My men are all perfectly sane, I assure you. They are as well aware as I am that if anything should happen to this Station it must be the end of all of us."

"But might there not be one—well, let us call him a selflessly patriotic man—who might consider it his duty to wreck this Station, even at the cost of his own life?"

"I think not. My command was staffed by picked, intelligent men. They are well aware that no one is going to *win* this war now. So that the object has become to survive it."

"But, General, are you not overlooking the fact that we, here, are still a fighting unit—the only one left in this theatre of war."

The General's eyebrows rose a little. He pondered Troon for a moment, and then smiled slightly.

"I see. I have been a little puzzled. Your officers are still under that impression?"

Troon leaned forward to tap his cigarette ash into a tray.

"Perhaps I don't quite understand you, General."

"Don't you, Commander? I

am speaking of your value as a fighting unit."

Their eyes met steadily for some seconds. Troon shrugged.

"How high would *you* place our value as a fighting unit, General?"

General Budorieff shook his head gently.

"Not very high, I am afraid, Commander," he said, and then, with a touch of apology in his manner, continued: "Before the last attack on our Station you had dispatched nine medium missiles. I do not know whether you have fired any more since then, therefore the total striking power at your disposal may be either three medium missiles—or none at all."

Troon turned, and looked out of the window towards the camouflaged missile-pits. His voice shook as he asked, slowly:

"May I inquire how long you have known this, General?"

Gently the General said:

"About six months."

Troon put his hand over his eyes. For a minute or two no one spoke. At length the General said:

"Will you permit me to extend my sincere congratulations, Commander Troon?"

You must have played it magnificently."

Troon, looking up, saw that he was genuine.

"I shall have to tell them now," he said. "It is going to hurt their pride. They thought of everything but that."

"It would, I think, be better to tell them now," agreed Budorieff, "but is not necessary for them to know that *we* knew."

"Thank you, General. That will at least do something to diminish the farcical element for them."

"Do not take it too hard, Commander. Bluff and counterbluff are, after all, an important part of strategy—and to have maintained such a bluff as that for almost twenty years is, if I may say so, masterly. I have been told that our people simply refused to believe our agents' first reports on it.

"Besides, what was our chief purpose here—yours, mine, and the Americans? Not to *make* war. We were a threat which, it was hoped, would help to *prevent* war—and one fancies that all of us here did do something to postpone it. Once fighting was allowed to start, it could make really very little difference

whether our missiles were added to the general destruction or not. We have all known in our hearts that this war, if it should come, would not be a kind that anyone could win.

"For my part, I was greatly relieved when I received this report on your armament. The thought that I might one day be required to destroy your quite defenseless Station was not pleasant. And consider how it turns out. It is simply because your weapons were a bluff that your Station still exists: and because it exists, that we still have a foothold on the moon. That is important."

Troon looked up.

"You think so, too, General? Not very many people do."

"There are not, at any time, many people who have—what do you call it in English?—Divine discontent? Vision? Most men like to be settled among their familiar things with a notice on the door: 'Do Not Disturb'. They would still have that notice hanging outside their caves if it were not for the few discontented men. Therefore it is *important* that we are still here, *important* that we do not lose our gains. You understand?"

Troon nodded. He smiled faintly.

"I understand, General. I understand very well. Why did I fight for a Moon Station? Why did I come here, and stay here? To hold on to it so that one day I could say to a younger man: 'Here it is. We've got you this far. Now go ahead. The stars are before you . . .' Yes, I understand. But what I have had to wonder lately is whether the time will ever come for me to say it . . ."

General Budorieff nodded. He looked out, long and specu-

lative at the pearl-blue Earth.

"Will there be any rocket-ships left? Will there be any one left to bring them?" he murmured.

Troon looked in the same direction. With the pale earth-light shining in his face he felt a sudden conviction.

"They'll come," he said. "Some of them will hear the thin gnat-voices crying . . . They'll have to come . . . And, one day, they'll go on . . ."

THE END

THE ELEVENTH PLAGUE

(Continued from page 79)

argument, and Flack saw Esquilia fall to the ground—"

Joel lifted his shaking hands and covered his face.

"Two dead," he said. "Two dead, one mad, the assignment a failure . . ."

"Easy, Captain."

"We didn't know how well off we were when Corsini was after us. His plagues drew us together, united us against a common enemy, made us a

unit. For months, he gave us something to occupy our minds and our actions, something to fight for, to live for. But when the magician died, there was nothing else. Only space, and that cold planet, and boredom, and each other . . .

"That was the worst plague of all, Colonel," Joel Saylo said, meeting the officer's somber eyes. Loneliness . . ."

THE END

In a dead world, there were only a few hundred of them left. And a few hundred of the enemy. But even then it seemed as if man never had

ENOUGH ROPE

By LOUIS FISHER

WITH the dawn came a cold, hard rain that brewed in the eaves of the fourteen sheds, that hammered the gates of the barbed wire fence, that pounded the earth into soft, churning mud. In shed number six we watched it, counting each drop; as if there were numbers large enough to count the rain, or the tears that had fallen, or were yet to fall.

Tracy turned away from the window. He said, "Looks like there won't be a hanging this morning."

"Don't count on it," I told him. "They haven't missed a day yet."

Tracy unfolded his huge arms. He was a wide, very bulky man. Ten times strong, but slow moving and tired. He said, "Hell, even they don't

like to get wet on this job."

"Keep your eyes open anyway," I said.

I said it loud enough for the others to hear. There were three windows in the shed, with two men stationed at each. Visibility wasn't good, and it was important that we see the enemy at the earliest possible moment.

Spread across the room in their straw beds, the rest of our men were sleeping or loafing or waiting, or maybe even praying. All except three. Three of our men were not in the shed. Three of our men were busy. They were underneath us, crawling and digging, creating a doorway to freedom, chasing a rainbow.

Suddenly, at the opposite

window, a young colored boy named Bailey whirled and shouted, "Heah they come!"

Tracy lumbered over to the door and put his full weight against it. At the same time I dove into the corner. On my knees I rapped loudly on the boards. I kept knocking. It was going to be close again. Always so close.

Part of the floor separated, and the three men came up from the tunnel. Luke Adams came last. He brushed off the dirt and helped me move a cot into a covering position. Although he'd been digging all morning, Luke wasn't even breathing hard. He was tall and lean with tight lips that never smiled. He was the man who led us, and pushed us, and never stopped trying. Luke wouldn't let us give up. Luke would fight forever.

But if one morning they should take Luke Adams away, we'd probably sit down and cry, and feel sorry for ourselves, and just keep on crying until our turn came.

When everything was in order, Tracy stepped away from the door. We waited. Today it was shed number six. It was to be one of us. Who?

The enemy arrived. Five of them, heavily armed, opening the door and standing there. Their eyes met each of ours.

They knew which one they wanted. They just liked to make us sweat. Watching their lips, I wondered how I'd react to hearing my own name called. I wondered if I'd be able to fight the terror and walk out bravely, leaving a final word of encouragement to the others. Or would I scream?

One of the enemy stepped forward. He raised his hand, extended one finger, arced it slowly through the shed. Eeny, meeny, miny, moe. The hand swung back the other way, then stopped. He laughed, and said, "Tracy."

Luke sprung up, his fists clenched. "Leave him alone."

"Pipe down," Tracy told him, "or they'll take us both." He moved in between the guards, and forced a farewell grin. "I'm ready," he said.

Luke wasn't listening. He started forward. I blocked him. I saw him tighten, his eyes burning. "So long, boy," he said. "I'll get them for you."

He meant it. He made the words a vow. A promise to be fulfilled. And if anyone could carry it through, it was Luke Adams.

We watched the execution. They had to use a double rope for Tracy.

I reached for a worn sheaf of paper, licked the stub of a pencil, and scratched out another name.

Luke sat down beside me. "I guess it's just as well," he said. "Tracy never would have fit in the tunnel, but it always hits me hardest when the bigger men get it. I don't know why."

"That leaves thirty of us in this shed, a hundred and eighty-two altogether," I said, and pocketed the notebook. Less and less, I thought. There were over a thousand to start with. In a few more months there'd be no need for a census.

"Well they got no more than five hundred," Luke answered.

"That's about right."

"We can still take them."

I wondered if it mattered. A few hundred people left out of billions. The world was charred and empty. Humanity was down to a tiny percentage with the remainder rapidly extinguishing itself. Life's last chance would swing on the gallows, and the race of man would disappear.

Funny what a few bombs can do. Just enough of them to reach the critical point, and then they were meaningless compared to the radioactivity. The poison had quickly paint-

ed a portrait of death. All that remained were the few lucky ones; the freaks who were somehow immune to radiation. They weren't many.

But the war went on.

The enemy had never stopped. Eventually they captured us all. Eventually they won the war. Now we were gathered together, all the winners and losers, in a deep valley where the air was not as polluted as in other parts of a dead world.

The enemy still blamed us for the war. They had a schedule, a simple schedule, an unerring formula. Hang one every morning and then there'd be none.

The clouds were dark and sick.

That afternoon I spent three hours working on the tunnel. We made good progress. When I finished my shift, I brought Luke the news. "We're right underneath," I said. "We can break through tonight."

Considering it, Luke said. "No sense waiting then. We go tonight."

We passed the word.

The plans had been finalized long ago, but we reviewed the details. Each man had his instructions, his position. It would be a rough game to play, but what could we lose?

Later I told Luke, "Some of them seem a little scared."

"Anything special?" he asked.

"Well, some of the other sheds have tried tunnels. You know what happened."

"They were stupid guys who tried to get to the outside. Those fences have electric beams that go down a lot deeper than we could dig. That's why we're not going under the fence."

"Well I'm with you, Luke," I said. "It seems okay to me."

"You're damned right it is. They've got a dozen guards around that ordnance building in the yard, but you can bet that they never thought to wire it like the fence."

I nodded. "If it were, we'd have felt it already. If our directions are straight, we're directly underneath it now."

"Don't worry. I mapped it out good." Luke rubbed his hands together. "Just let me feel one of those guns. And a grenade. They're real pretty, those grenades."

That's where we were different. I didn't look forward to more killing. Luke was a fighter, but not me. Of course it was necessary, and I was ready to do my part.

Luke's voice softened. "Maybe by tomorrow I'll be able to see Ann again. It's

been a long time—too long."

"I'm surprised you didn't tunnel over to shed ten instead," I told him.

He said, "I thought about it. I'll go crazy if I don't see her soon. Me and Ann were the only ones left in Cleveland. I found her ransacking a burned up supermarket. So I helped her. We went up to one of those mansions that was still half standing, and she cooked the swellest meal. We spent almost a month together before they found us. Hell, we didn't even know that there was anyone left to hide from."

"I'd like to meet her," I said.

All the women were kept in the two sheds at the far end of the yard. The only time we'd see any of them is when they hanged one. The women took their regular turns on the gallows.

It all added up to zero. I had it figured out. Once I had tried to explain it to the enemy. I told them it was important to keep us alive; let us marry and have children. This was a village of immunities. Of the children that might be born here, most would die, but a few would inherit the resistant qualities. Then of their children, much more would live. And so on

down the line until someday the world might see a race of healthy, normal people to whom radiation would not even be an annoyance.

But the odds were against it because the enemy wouldn't listen. Call it blindness. The eyes that had seen a world crumble were filled with hate and anger. Call it madness. The arms that had held the dead and the dying now ached to crush the cause. The hearts that once knew love and pity were broken by the bitter war. They'd not forgive or forget.

Call it vengeance.

And as they reduced our numbers, they lessened the chances of human survival. The enemy was concerned only with complete retaliation, not realizing that they were actually destroying themselves.

"Everybody all set?" Luke asked, as soon as it was dark.

"Yeah man," Bailey said. "If ah find a razor, you guys can just sit down and watch."

"All right, let's go. Remember to keep it quiet."

Luke pulled away the boards and started down. The others followed eagerly. I stayed at the window until they all vanished. After a last look around, I went under the

floor and closed it up behind me.

The darkness was blinding. Breathing was difficult. We moved forward on our knees, our heads low to keep the dirt out of our eyes. Our shoulders rubbed against the sides of the tunnel. We were a snake wriggling through the damp earth. We were a chain of desperation. We were ready.

The hours brought a storm of sand, as fingers flew and raced the dawn, as muscles ached and kept right on, as captives dug as captives can. Closer and closer we burrowed. Up and up we came. And a board shuddered and creaked in the floor of an arsenal.

We rose from the dust.

"Easy, easy," Luke cautioned. He passed out the weapons.

We picked out guns and rifles, filling our pockets with ammunition. Luke strapped on a bag of grenades. Everyone got a knife, to be used first and for as long as possible. We crept to the doors and windows. Luke gave the signal.

The rain had stopped. We crawled through the mud, taking care of the guards one at a time. Silently, we released every shed, building our forces into an army. Then Bailey was cornered. To save

him I fired the first shot, and the yard became an earth-bound Hell.

It was the war all over again, sudden and roaring. Hours of madness and fury as the enemy returned fire for fire. Our losses were heavy, but we had the advantage of complete surprise and the invincibility of men on their last mission. The enemy wavered, and fought, and fell back. Their efforts poured out with their blood.

Now the enemy screamed and ran and died, and ran and died, and died.

By daylight the fighting ended. The camp was ours. Captors were captives, and we were free of the fences and gallows. Free to recreate the world.

I ran with Luke over to shed number ten.

"Ann, Ann, it's me," he shouted, looking for her.

One of the women grabbed him. "She was hurt. They took her over to twelve," she said.

We raced across the yard and burst into the temporary hospital. Luke stumbled through, checking every cot. I talked to the medic, and then caught up with him.

"Where is she?" he shouted.

I shook my head. "She's dead, Luke."

He hit me hard in the mouth. My head seemed to break into pieces. The lights went out.

I didn't come out of it for a couple of days. They told me I had a concussion. I guess I couldn't blame Luke Adams too much. He had to take it out on somebody.

He came to see me.

"I sure am sorry," Luke said. He pulled up a chair. "As the new mayor, I've come to tell you that you're appointed to my cabinet, as soon as you can make it."

"I'll be there," I said. It would be wonderful living in a free world again, even the little that remained of it.

Luke went on. "Everything's fine now. The enemy's behind their own lousy barbed wire, probably looking for a way to escape. But they won't." He looked up, and it was the first time I ever saw him smile. "It's just too bad you weren't up this morning. You missed the greatest day."

"What happened?" I asked.

He stood up. "Today we hung the hangman."

I closed my eyes. The image of the gallows made me sick.

Luke didn't notice. "And tomorrow," he said, and snapped his fingers, "... tomorrow we'll hang his brother."

THE END

ACCORDING TO YOU...

(Continued from page 7)

teaching orders. And, you would find a good healthy sprinkling of Baha'is, Unitarians and Buddhists too.

I object most strenuously to Mr. Doerr's implication that any member of any organized religious organization is a fool, an addledpated cretin, and opposed to science to boot. There is also the strong implication that the scientific frame of mind must be, by definition, coupled with atheism. Not all scientists are atheists any more than all atheists are scientifically minded.

Science fiction readers are pretty independent in matters of religion, ranging through many different denominations. I cannot see why Mr. Doerr would object to a tale revolving around the establishment of a Buddhist or Roman Catholic monastery on some trans-galactic planet, or why he would insist that a story hinging on the implications of presenting the Christian Gospel or the Buddhist Dharma to a species other than *homo sapiens* could be classed as strict fantasy.

I take my stand with H. L. Mencken, who stated his favorite blood sport was theology. Let the varying shades of orthodoxy and heresy create their worlds for the delight of fandom.

Edward F. Lacy III

P.O. Box 805

Houston 1, Texas

Dear Editor:

I have just read Mr. Joel Reiss' and Mrs. K. L. Johnson's letters in the September issue of *Fantastic*. May I please say a word in self-defense? I feel that I am being painted as somewhat of a crusader to do away with fiction and have only text books in our libraries. Nothing could be worse. I have been an avid reader of fiction all my life, and may I add here that I have learned a lot from fiction. In any case what I was trying to put across was not to "do everything but entertain" people.

There are faint but very definite rumblings in the fields of para-psychology-scientists-medical men—and now even the government is dabbling in it (subliminal advertising). Is it not rather frightening that the government is even worrying about the fact that the Russians could "brainwash" us from a Sputnik whirling through our heavens? Pretty fantastic isn't

it? But you see it *could* happen. I am merely pointing out that fantastic stories are preparing us for the shock of just this sort of thing. And I believe that this is the important educational role that this type of fiction is playing in our lives.

My 8-year-old son, at least twice a week, takes a "trip to the moon" using the closet for a spaceship. When I was 3 the word spaceship was certainly not in my vocabulary. Perhaps he will actually take that trip someday and if he does he will be ready for it emotionally. Why? Because Buck Rogers and his ilk have started children thinking about it. I am sorry if your readers think of me as some "poor misguided educator" trying to tear down the sales of perfectly delightful fiction; just the opposite—I think more people should read it.

So please, Mr. Editor, keep up your delightful stories. I would also like to add that I have received some wonderful letters from other readers of *Fantastic* (there were a few on my side).

Mrs. William Ward
RFD Box 949
Woodstock, N. Y.

• *Those of us who were reading Verne and Wells nearly a generation ago were not quite so startled when the satellites started whirling; similarly, those who read fantasy today may be better prepared for the undoubted fantasies-to-come within the next generation.*

Dear Editor:

In regard to Mr. Doerr's letter (October *Fantastic*): Science fiction is speculation which explores the possible. . . . I didn't say probable. What is scientific law today will most likely be considered primitive superstition a hundred years from now . . . does anyone remember the law of polarity which was tossed out the window a year ago?

As far as religious superstition is concerned, your belief in a god is your own business. But, while no one has yet been able to demonstrate (at will) the presence of a god or devil in the laboratory, no one has yet proven that such beings do not exist. Therefore I believe it is open for speculation and should be included in science fiction if a writer has a good story to tell. Our wise scientists haven't yet come up with a definite ex-

planation for the creation of the universe. I have several books with different explanations, all possible, but there is really no reason to believe that there can't be another one, or that any one of these is necessarily the true explanation.

As a graduate student in Sociology, Mr. Doerr should realize that the trait of a real scientist is an open mind. If you refuse to even hear an idea which conflicts with your beliefs, you are unable to evaluate it and you may be refusing to learn.

Unfortunately, this refusal to consider anything which conflicts with scientific dogma is a trait which characterizes too much of our science today. I don't know if there are ghosts, devils, or supernatural beings, and I don't know if there is really magic, but why condemn a man for exploring the possibilities in this area? I do know, from personal experience, that clairvoyance is a reality, and I have very good reason to believe that there are other fields, not yet recognized by organized science, which must be explored before we are ready to call ourselves an educated culture.

If our science and culture is to progress beyond the point where we think we know everything, someone has to lead the way and offer a forum for independent thinking. *Fantastic, Amazing* and other magazines of this type should lead the way. I hope you will always keep your magazines open for original thinking, no matter how improbable.

Ben Preece
1438 15th St.
Santa Monica, Calif.

• *Alright, Mr. Doerr, any rebuttal?*

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WOULD Like to become acquainted with other science fiction readers through correspondence. Ann Castro, 5717 North Maple, Rialto, Calif.



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